

IDIC

IDIC LOG 10

ENCOUNTERS AND COUNTERMOVES



a Star Trek Fanzine

ENCOUNTERS and COUNTERMOVES

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Commander Uhura, a light travelling bag slung over her shoulder, was briskly striding down the Great Hall of Starfleet Headquarters; she was not unaware of the glances cast in the direction of her trim figure, clad in the red and black uniform of the Fleet, and although she feigned indifference she couldn't help but be secretly flattered. She nodded and smiled at colleagues and acquaintances along the way, but she never slackened her pace, and made her way to the main orbital transporters.

Suddenly, in the crowd of people just ahead of her, a familiar figure sauntering along caught her attention. Uhura quickened her pace and soon fell into step with a middle-aged individual dressed in casual clothes. Slipping a hand through his arm, she said with mock severity,

"Ah ah, Doctor! So, I've caught you playing truant! Have you given up your research?"

Doctor McCoy gave a start and spun around. "Uhura! Good God, you startled me! Don't you have any consideration for my blood pressure?" Then he added with a grin, "It's good to see you, my dear. You look wonderful!" and they hugged each other.

"But what are you doing here?" McCoy inquired. "I thought you'd gone for a month's leave to your home in Africa?"

"So I did, Doctor, but I was recalled posthaste as my next assignment has been unexpectedly brought forward, and I'm on my way to report for duty." Uhura's dark eyes sparkled with excitement.

"I bet I know where you're going!....Enterprise!" McCoy declared.

"Yes sir! And I bet that's where you're going too!"

"Sure I am, but how did you know?"

"Christine told me, Doctor," the Commander admitted with a laugh.

"Of course, I might have known! Well, since Chapel wasn't available for this trip Jim has roped me in, arguing that they couldn't manage without me, and that a nice quiet three week flight was just what I need. So....here I am! And I'm real glad that you'll be along with us. But let's go and have a drink," the Doctor suggested as they came abreast of one of the Base coffee rooms. "I see that we still have twenty minutes to spare....come on."

"No thank you, Doctor, another time. I must report to the transporter rooms now."

"Nonsense!" retorted McCoy, taking her arm. "A travel pod is going to pick me up in twenty minutes, by special request, mind you!"

"How come?" Uhura inquired, curious.

The Doctor explained gleefully. "Well, I said to the Admiral that I categorically refused to beam up, and if they wanted me, they'd better send a shuttle over, or look for a Ship's Surgeon elsewhere. So....what could they do?" he chuckled as he led the way into the Galactic Coffee Room, favourite meeting place of Starfleet personnel.

"For shame, that's blackmail, Doctor McCoy," Uhura protested. "I wonder what the Captain had to say about that?"

"What could he say? Admiral James T. Kirk's orders. Anyway, blackmail or not, it worked," the Doctor grinned shamelessly, and led her to a table by one of the large bay windows offering an extensive view of San Francisco.

Once they had ordered their drinks McCoy glanced at Uhura's bag and asked, "Is that all the luggage you're carrying for three weeks?"

"Of course not!" she replied with a laugh. "I've sent another bag ahead, and I have some of my things left in my quarters."

"That's right," McCoy nodded. "You've already done some of these training cruises with Spock, haven't you?"

"Yes, Doctor, two trips already. This one will be my third."

McCoy hesitated, took a sip of brandy, then said, "....and.... er....what is it like now on the Bridge? I mean....with Spock instead of Jim Kirk in command?"

"Well...." Uhura paused for thought. "You know, it seemed strange, at first, not to see Admiral Kirk in the command chair, especially since we had all assumed, after V'ger, that he would keep the Enterprise. But then....she was turned into a training ship, and the Admiral went back to Headquarters, and naturally....it seemed right for Mr Spock to take over, being assigned anyway to Command Training School. So....I should say it doesn't make any real difference on the Bridge, what with new personnel, the trainees, and so forth. But we, I mean the old hands, do feel sometimes as though....something is missing. You know...." (McCoy nodded) "and Spock feels that way I'm sure."

"Mmmm," McCoy mused, savouring his drink, then continued, "and what is he like....as Captain?"

Uhura's eyebrows rose ironically. "What would you expect, Doctor? Captain Spock is his usual, cool, dignified Vulcan self. You wouldn't want him to be otherwise, now, would you?" with a hint of mild reproach in her voice.

"Of course not, my dear. Spock will always be Spock, no matter what, and to tell you the truth, I didn't expect that his promotion would change our Vulcan, that's not his style. But all the same, I'm curious to see how he manages. I can't help remember our discussions about command, him claiming not to be interested, and me telling him that once he tasted it, he'd like it, like everyone. Dammit, Uhura! Who would have believed it, two years ago! There's Spock, Captain of the Enterprise, while Jim Kirk is tied up to his desk with red tape!"

"Yes...." Uhura sighed. "Things do change, don't they? But, Doctor, the remarkable thing, as you will certainly notice, is the way Spock has assumed command, so naturally, so 'logically', as if he were born to be Captain, and him a man of science first and foremost."

"So, I was right from the start," McCoy crowed.

"I'm not sure," she replied seriously. "I mean, I don't think

Spock really likes command, but he is awfully good at it, as at everything he undertakes. In a very different style from Captain Kirk, of course; more restrained, more subtle, perhaps. And he has a way with the cadets, just perfect. He certainly has a gift for teaching."

"So I heard.... He seems to be highly appreciated at the Academy. But what about the cruise? Just manoeuvres after manoeuvres, I imagine? Must be pretty dull for three weeks on end."

"In a way....yes. For us, it's just routine, but Spock usually keeps a trick or two up his sleeve and likes to spring them unexpectedly on the kids, so as to keep them on their toes! So, one way or the other, we're kept pretty busy."

"Yes, on the Bridge or in Engineering, I'm sure, but I guess Sickbay must be rather quiet, except for the usual odd ailments.... space sickness, headaches, etc. My department should be pretty slack....and that suits me down to the ground; I'll let my staff and trainees do all the work, and just sit back and take it easy."

"And what do you think Spock will say about that?" teased his companion.

"He'll have nothing to say! I'm still Chief of my department, even though a pointy-eared pixie is now sitting in the Command chair!" McCoy retorted with spirit, rising at once to the bait.

"All set to cross swords with Spock, I can see!"

"Sure, my dear, and I'm looking forward to a good old wrangle, as in the old days. It'd be a fine thing indeed if a Vulcan, Captain though he be, should come and dictate in my Sickbay!" McCoy declared, blue eyes blazing in anticipation.

As Uhura shook her head, imagining the old sparring partners' encounter, the Doctor, with a look at his chronometer, beckoned to a waiter, and was just downing the rest of his drink when a noisy party arrived and took possession of a table nearby. They were so loud that the two officers could not help but overhear the gist of their discussion, which, curiously enough, related to the Academy and the good ship Enterprise.

"Must be some cadets' parents who've just kissed their offspring goodbye," Uhura whispered to McCoy. He nodded while paying the bill presented by the waiter, and was about to get to his feet when a comment at the next table made him prick up his ears and subside in his chair. He and Uhura traded glances as a high-pitched and affected female voice declared peremptorily,

"It's bad enough for Starfleet to assign an old ship like this Enterprise to the training of our cadets, but why should they put a Vulcan in command? As if they couldn't find a more qualified officer among our own people. A Vulcan!...Really!"

"But what's wrong with Vulcans?" someone asked. "I always heard they are logical, efficient...."

"Added to that, they are awfully good-looking, aren't they?" another woman put in with a self-conscious titter.

"They may be all that," declared a short, fair-haired, self-important-looking man, "but I am not at all happy to entrust a

daughter of mine to a Vulcan for a three week cruise. That's what I said the other day to my friend Vice-Admiral Kraft. He assured me that this Captain Spock was all right....still, I wonder...."

"Good God, man! Do you know who you're talking about?" someone cut in with a short laugh. "Captain Spock is the most famous Vulcan in the Fleet, a personal friend of Admiral Kirk. He has made his career on the Enterprise.... I should say he is all right! One of the best!"

"That's not what I mean. He's competent and efficient all right! No, what I don't like is the idea of our kids being cooped up for three weeks on that vessel with a Vulcan in command. These aliens are special, you know, all brain but no heart, no feeling.... like bloody walking computers!"

This stale joke provoked loud laughter, and Uhura, cheeks hot with anger and embarrassment, stole a glance at McCoy, who muttered, "Stupid people! How dare they! I've a good mind to...."

"No, Doctor, don't. We'd better leave now." Picking up her bag she stood up, while behind her the snobbish woman pointed out with relish,

"And....do you know that these people have such alien ways! For instance, they can read your thoughts, control your mind, and I was even told that...." and, dropping her voice to a whisper, she made some revelations shocking enough to provoke loud exclamations and guffaws.

The two Starfleet officers stiffened, and Doctor McCoy, purple with anger, jumped to his feet and rasped loudly, "Commander, let's get out of here! This atmosphere of bigotry and prejudice is getting unbreathable. Come on, let's go!" He grabbed Uhura's bag and noisily stumped to the door, leaving a silenced and bemused party staring after him. Uhura, with a disdainful glance in their direction, followed suit, but did not miss the muttered comments.

"Did you hear that? What damn impudence!.... Wonder who they are.... Pah! Who cares, anyway?"

As she reached the door, a cool voice rose over the hubbub of the room, and, dripping with scorn, let fall the information, "If you want to know, my good man, they are Enterprise senior officers!"

That made her feel better, all at once.

A few minutes later the aforementioned officers were striding along the runway to the shuttleport, McCoy still fuming and cursing, and his companion panting at his side. When they finally entered the assembly lounge, Uhura dropped into a chair and started to giggle helplessly. The Doctor plumped himself down at her side and eyed her suspiciously.

"What's the joke?"

"Really, Doctor....you....you take the biscuit! God knows, the umpteen times you've taunted our Vulcan for being a walking computer, and there you go, flaring up to blazes when someone else does just the same! Isn't that perfectly 'illogical'?"

McCoy's face split into a wide grin. "Well....I must admit there have been times when that maddening Vulcan has provoked me

beyond patience and brought upon himself the rough edge of my tongue, but I'm damned if I'll let any Tom, Dick or Harry slander Spock publicly, in the busiest bar in Starfleet!"

"Quite right, Doctor. Everybody should know that abusing Captain Spock is Doctor McCoy's exclusive privilege!" Uhura declared deadpan, then, with a grin, she added, "You were wonderful, really, and you should have seen their faces when we left!"

They were still laughing when the circular doors at the other end of the room parted, letting in a young ensign who stepped forward briskly.

"Doctor McCoy, sir?"

"Yeah....that's me."

"The Captain has ordered me to pick you up, sir. The pod is waiting; this way please."

"Commander Uhura is also coming along, Ensign....What's your name?"

"O'Brien, sir. Very good, sir," replied the young man, standing stiffly to attention. He was obviously one of the new recruits, and imbued with the importance of his mission.

"Right, O'Brien, lead the way," McCoy replied, making for the door.

Hasty steps sounded behind them, and a voice called, "Hey! Just a moment!" as a thin, fair-headed man, carrying a canvas grip, hurried up to them. "Doctor McCoy, Uhura....glad to see you!"

"My word! Here's a familiar face," declared McCoy. "Haven't seen you for ages, Lieutenant....er...."

"Farrell, Lieutenant-Commander John Farrell," Uhura prompted readily. "How are you, Farrell, and what brings you here?"

"Well," he replied, as they walked along the gangway to the travel pod, "it's rather unexpected. I've been assigned to the Hood as First Officer."

"Congratulations!" put in McCoy.

"Thank you, Doctor. But she's docked for overhaul for about a month, so in the meantime I've been offered a temporary position on the Enterprise, as Chief Navigator, and I've been instructed to report here for transportation. So, here I am."

"That's great! We're glad to have you back with us," Uhura smiled.

"So am I; I wouldn't have missed this assignment, even for a short time," Farrell agreed heartily.

As soon as they stepped into the pod the ensign touched the locking mechanism, and the doors snapped shut, then the crewman sitting at the console activated the controls. Soon the pod was released from its docking locks, and they were under way.

A few moments later they were out in space, heading for the

huge orbital dockyard that seemed to hang over one side of Earth which they were swiftly skirting.

McCoy, after a preliminary clearing of the throat, said conversationally, "I suppose, Farrell, that you've been told of the changes on the Enterprise?"

"Of course, Doctor. We always know what's happening with the Enterprise, and I heard that Mr Spock is her Captain now, since Admiral Kirk is back at Headquarters. But Sulu is still there, isn't he?"

"Yes, for the moment, and pending a command assignment," Uhura informed him. "But Chekov is no longer with us, you know. He has been promoted to First Officer to Captain Terrell on the Reliant."

"Is that so? And what about Mr Scott?"

Uhura laughed merrily. "Can you possibly imagine the Enterprise without Scotty? Of course he's there, in command of Engineering, as of right."

Presently the conversation slackened as the officers standing behind the pilot watched the blue planet slowly receding, lit by the last rays of the setting sun. The most blase of the onlookers were stricken anew by the breathtaking beauty of the spectacle.

"You have to admit, Uhura, that this is worth the trip, and much better than having your molecules shuffled by some damn transporter!"

"Oh, I agree, Doctor," she smiled. "I admit that this is a sight one never gets tired of. On the other hand, you must admit that the beam up is quicker."

"Pah! What's a few minutes more in a lifetime? By the way, Mr O'Brien," he went on, addressing the young ensign, who was standing behind him, "what time do we leave orbit, do you know?"

"At 2030 hours, Earth time, sir."

"Good, then we'll have time to settle down," McCoy concluded.

Meantime, the pod had reached the orbital docks and was threading its way through the lacy structures which shone in the surrounding floodlights like silver filigree against the darkness of space. They flew by a number of craft and vessels engulfed in the frenetic activity of workpods and space-suited figures, then, after a sweeping turn, they were suddenly offered the view of the Enterprise in her regal and dazzling whiteness.

"There she is," Uhura murmured with fondness.

Farrell cleared his throat and said aloud what everyone felt. "It's like coming home."

Then they watched in silence as their small craft slowly skirted the gleaming flank of the Starship, heading for the docking port, thus allowing them time to admire the streamlined hull, strongly lit by the floodlights of the docks. Finally the pod reached the assigned airlock, backed into position, and the clink of the bolts was heard as Doctor McCoy, probably to break the spell, gave a friendly pat to the pilot's shoulder, saying, "Nice trip,

young man. It was worth it, eh, Uhura?"

"Sure, Doctor," she agreed heartily.

The airlock doors swished open, the officers filed out, and as they entered the staging area Ensign O'Brien suggested, "Shall I have your luggage taken to your cabins?"

"Oh, would you, please," Uhura replied with a smile.

McCoy nodded his thanks, then, as if on second thought, turned to the windows of the control room where two technicians had supervised their arrival.

"Permission to come aboard?" he called.

"Permission granted; welcome aboard," replied a deep voice behind him. Startled, he turned on his heel, and there at the entrance of the room stood the tall figure of the Vulcan, hands clasped at his back, dark eyes coolly appraising the group of officers. He seemed as cold and austere as ever, but at close quarters the sharp-eyed CMO detected a faint gleam in his eyes.

"Spock!" he cried, grinning from ear to ear, then hastily corrected it to a more formal, "Captain."

"I trust that your transfer in the pod has been satisfactory, Doctor," said Spock blandly.

"Perfectly, thank you, but," McCoy could not resist asking, "how come that a Starship Captain appears personally to greet his officers? Is it new Starfleet regulations?"

"Negative, Doctor, but why not make an exception to regulations once in a while?"

"Oh really? That's new, indeed," McCoy muttered, quite intrigued. Things were coming to a pretty pass if the Vulcan winked at his blessed regulations....even once in a while.

Ignoring the comment, the Captain gazed at Uhura with approval. "I see that you were able to reach the Base in time, Commander. I regret that you had to shorten your leave, but the date of the cruise has been unexpectedly changed by Starfleet Command."

"So I heard, Captain, but that's all right, I'll make it up another time. Is there anything special that I should know?"

"No, except that there will be six trainees in Communications, Commander."

"Very good, sir. That will keep me pretty busy," she said primly.

Spock nodded, then turned his gaze to Farrell, who was standing quietly apart. "Lieutenant-Commander Farrell, I am glad to have you joining us for this training cruise. It has been a long time."

"Indeed, Captain, and it's good to be back here, even for a temporary assignment."

"You will find many changes on board, Mr Farrell, especially on

the Bridge, but I am sure that a few hours will be sufficient for you to master all the technical improvements brought to the ship."

"I'll do my best, Captain."

"Well, gentlemen, Ms Uhura, that will be all. I expect to see you on the Bridge in thirty minutes. Mr O'Brien, show Lieutenant-Commander Farrell to his quarters."

"Aye, sir." The young ensign picked up Farrell's bag and headed for the exit, preceded by Uhura who was already way ahead. Spock watched them go, then turned his attention back to McCoy.

"You do not have to be shown the way, do you, Doctor?"

"No, I guess not, unless they've managed to replan my department or move my quarters," McCoy grumbled out of habit.

There was an ironic gleam in the Vulcan's eyes. "No, Doctor. Everything is as you left it one and a half years ago. That was your last voyage with us, you remember?"

"I'm not likely to forget that trip," McCoy replied, with a retrospective shiver. "Nor our encounter with that darn probe! But Jim was with us then...." A pause followed, as the Doctor looked searchingly at the impassive face. "I shall miss him, Spock....and you?"

The two men stared at one other for a few seconds, the memory of their mutual friend haunting their minds, then Spock coolly replied, "What would you expect, Doctor?" He strode briskly to the turbolift. "I must leave you now; Mr Scott is expecting me in Engineering....and your staff is expecting you in Sickbay, Doctor," he intimated.

"Aye aye, Captain, sir," McCoy shot back, in an attempt to sting the Vulcan out of his maddening calm. It was all for nothing. Spock remained his imperturbable self but for a slight frown of slanted eyebrows, which the Doctor missed anyway. Without a word the Captain stepped into the lift, which sped him down to the lower decks, leaving McCoy somewhat disgruntled. He shrugged, and made his way to his quarters.

CHAPTER II

In the hall by the main transporters, activity was at a peak. The benevolent lieutenant in charge of personnel was busy checking the latest arrivals and despatching them to their respective departments. With the assistance of two ensigns he was ticking off the cadets' names on his list, while shouting instructions left and right. The operation was carried out efficiently and rapidly, amidst the excitement of the youngsters, who could not get over the thrill of being at last on board the legendary Enterprise.

Lieutenant Killikranky, better known as Killy among his peers, was an old hand, and he knew that his Captain relied on his ability and long experience to detect immediately any unauthorised items that the trainees might attempt to smuggle aboard. Killikranky was well aware of the resourcefulness some of them called upon to get their precious tokens past his control, so, equipped with a detecting device, he and his assistants were carefully checking bags and cases. They did not, however, pay any special attention to the loose jacket a

pretty blonde sported, being more interested in the bulky canvas bag which she was dragging along.

"Hey!" the lieutenant exclaimed. "Do you think we're carrying you all over the galaxy? You've brought enough stuff to last you three months! What's your name?"

"Joyce Garrick, sir," the girl replied breathlessly.

"Garrick....Garrick...." Killy looked down his roll. "Ah, Garrick....here you are. You're sharing a cabin with Gordon on Deck Six."

"Oh, great!" cried the girl, delighted. "Thank you, sir. Here's Gordon," and she pointed to a slim girl about her own age, with chestnut hair and dreamy grey eyes. "Come on, Alison," she called. "We're room mates! Hurry up!"

"Alison Gordon," noted Lieutenant Killikrunky. "Would you be of Scottish ancestry, by any chance?"

"Yes, sir," she replied, shyly.

"Well, I'll bet you get along fine with Mr Scott, our Chief Engineer. All right, move along.... Next, please!"

The two girls made their way to the crowded lifts and managed to squeeze in with their bags. The doors slid shut, but stopped midway, and a red alarm-light flashed above their heads.

"What's that?" - "Ramirez, mind your guitar, it's sticking out!" - "Oh bother! I can't get it in!" - "Push, everyone!" With much giggling and scrambling, they succeeded in packing into the lift, and the doors finally glided shut, but the car stayed motionless.

"What now? What do we do?" Someone laughed nervously.

A disembodied female voice answered the question. "Please state your destination."

"Deck Six," - "Deck Seven," the cadets cried simultaneously.

Whoosh! The lift went up like a shot, and after what seemed only a few seconds, slowed down smoothly; the doors parted slowly, spilling its cargo, which scattered along the corridor in bubbling anticipation. A moment of confusion followed as the trainees paced the corridors in search of their cabins, but gradually the excitement subsided and everyone settled down, the doors closed, and the decks recovered their customary tranquility.

Cadets Garrick and Gordon dropped their bags and looked around, delighted with the size and comfort of their quarters.

"Which one do you prefer?" asked the blonde Joyce, sinking gratefully onto the nearest bed.

"Doesn't matter, just keep that one," Alison replied, while exploring closets and built-in cupboards. Then their eyes met, and they burst out laughing.

"I made it! I made it!" Garrick crowed joyfully. "I told you I could bluff them....and I did!"

"Yes, you did, but it was risky," the other replied, as she watched her friend unzip her jacket, revealing in the process a large scarf wrapped around her slim waist, in which lay, fast asleep, a beautiful tabby cat. Joyce untied the scarf, gathered the animal into her arms, and stroked it lovingly.

"Time to wake up, my pretty, we've arrived."

Alison looked at the cat doubtfully. "Do you think she's all right? I hope that sleeping pill wasn't too strong for her?"

"Oh no, she's used to it, and it had better be effective.... just imagine their faces if my Cherie had let out a miaow in the transporter room!" She laid the already stirring cat down on a pillow, then straightened up and looked around.

"Is there a food dispenser somewhere? I'll get her a bowl of milk."

"It's over there; and if you want to unpack now you'd better hurry. Here are our schedules for the next two days, and we have to report to our senior officer in....forty minutes. Yours is Uhura, Joyce."

"Oh good! I didn't expect her, I thought she'd gone on leave. She's great, but I'd better watch out, because she doesn't mince her words when we botch things in her class. She's very exacting, but my! She's a real wizard! Who's your senior, Alison?"

"The ineffable Schwarzenberg! Just my luck! I hear he's a terror. I only hope he won't keep us in the computer room all the time, and that I'll have a chance to work on the Bridge sometimes," she added wistfully.

They were unpacking and proudly laying out their brand new uniforms on their beds. Garrick stole a mischievous glance at her friend. "Yes, of course, to admire your beloved Captain Spock at close quarters!"

"Oh, Joyce, don't be so silly!" Alison retorted, turning pink. Like many other students at the Academy, since she had taken his classes Alison had developed an irresistible crush on the enigmatic Vulcan.

Down in Engineering, Mr Scott, very much the Lord of his Manor, was presenting his bunch of trainees to the Captain; then, with a fatherly nod of dismissal, he sent them out and ushered Spock into his sanctum. Spock went straight to the Engineer's computer and punched the code to bring up on screen the outline of the training programme for the next three weeks. As Scotty peered at the display flashing on the viewer, a slow grin spread out under his moustache.

"That's good, Captain, verra good. I see you mean to keep us busy, as usual!"

"That is what a training cruise is for, Mr Scott. As you are well aware, the true character of a person, whatever their age, is best revealed in unexpected or hard-pressed situations, and as we should not encounter any such incidents as in the quadrant that we shall be in, the only thing to do is to provide them, would you not agree?"

"Right, Captain! That's the best way to teach those kids. As

you see, we're all ready and raring to go down here, especially my six cadets! You just have to say the word, Mr Spock....sorry, sir, I mean Captain. Old habits die hard, don't they?" he said, apologetically.

The Vulcan gazed at him and said quietly, "No need to apologise, Mr Scott. Old habits are not to be despised."

For a brief moment, the two men locked eyes, sharing the same wistful memories, then Spock turned deliberately to the door, assuming his most Vulcan expression, and announced, "Pre-launch countdown will commence in twenty-four minutes, Mr Scott."

"And departure will be right on schedule, sir, naturally." Scotty nodded his approval, but Captain Spock was already in the lift, bound for the upper decks.

As the minutes went by and the time of departure closed in steadily, the tension noticeably increased among the cadets, although many did their best to affect the cool indifference of old hands. They had duly reported to the heads of their departments, and those on watch duty were at their stations, ready to assist their senior officers in the pre-launch tasks.

One announcement had already sounded on the shipwide intercom. "Attention. All dockyard personnel and visitors are requested to leave the ship immediately....Message repeats: non-authorised persons are requested to leave immediately."

The last service shuttles had left, carrying away the dock technicians and personnel who had delivered supplies and equipment to the Enterprise. All had gone....except one. When the dock hands had trooped to the cargo and shuttle decks, no-one had noticed a coverall-clad figure stealthily slip away and vanish into a locker-room.

Then the pre-launch countdown began, and the seconds ticked inexorably by in harmony with the heartbeats of the trainees, many of whom were to experience their very first voyage in deep space. The Bridge was at peak activity and the officers busy at their stations for the final checks and rechecks. The newcomers couldn't help but be on edge with anticipation, and a touch of tension was felt in the air. Then the turbolift doors parted, a tall figure stepped out, and a young voice announced nervously, "Captain on the Bridge!"

At once silence fell, and Spock directed an appraising glance at the cadet standing by the doors, then paused behind the rail, calmly surveying the company and acknowledging with an imperceptible nod the smiles of greeting from his command team. Almost at once the reassuring presence of the Vulcan, standing still and silent, released the tension, and the atmosphere of feverish, noisy activity gave way to quiet and confident efficiency.

The Captain began to pace slowly around the upper level of the Bridge, going from one station to the next with a quiet word to the crew there. Uhura, at the Comm. console, smiled up at him, and Lieutenant Schwarzenberg stood up and made a stiff little bow. Spock moved on to Weapons Control, manned by a young ensign new to the Enterprise, who looked up rather nervously as his Captain halted behind him.

"Status, Mr Kettenring?" Spock asked quietly.

"Ready and operational, Captain."

"Good." Spock turned away, then back again. "Tell me, Ensign, do you happen to be a relation of a Captain, later Admiral, Kettenring, who was in the United States Navy on Twentieth Century Earth, and who earned himself a reputation as an outstanding submarine officer? Kettenring is an uncommon name, I believe."

"Yes, sir." The ensign's face lit up with a shy smile. "Actually, Captain Philip Kettenring was a great, great, great grandfather of my father. I was named after him."

"Indeed?" Spock looked interested. "You have in your ancestry an officer of high reputation to live up to, Ensign."

"I know, sir. Thank you, sir," stammered the young man, inwardly wondering how a Vulcan could possibly know anything of United States Naval history. But Spock had already stepped down to Helm and Navigation, where he cast a comprehensive glance at the readouts displayed on the consoles.

"Well, gentlemen, I trust everything is under control?" A questioning eyebrow arched slightly.

"To be sure, Captain," the Asian officer replied with a grin, acknowledging the gentle tease Spock had indulged himself in. "We're all set, and we have received the 'stand by' signal from the dock, sir."

"Thank you, Mr Sulu." The Vulcan nodded, and looked at John Farrell. "Have you had time to familiarise yourself with your station, Lieutenant-Commander?"

"Aye, sir. Sulu has put me in the picture....I mean, he has briefed me," Farrell rectified hastily at the sight of the Vulcan's puzzled expression. "Our orbital departure is plotted and locked, Captain."

"Thank you." Spock cast a last look around, then sat down in the command chair and pushed the switch on its arm. "All decks, this is the Captain. Prepare for immediate departure. Stand by." He sat back, calm and watchful, while his team proceeded with the execution of the classic launching manoeuvres.

Uhura, who had been constantly in contact with Dock Communications Centre, announced that dock control clearance was confirmed. The Enterprise was now floating in the dock, clear of her moorings, and Sulu's hands moved to the Helm controls as he looked up at Spock, waiting for the command, but Spock, after a split-second of hesitation, and a, "Hold, please, Mr Sulu," flicked the com-switch, and said, "Bridge to Sickbay."

"Sickbay, McCoy here," the gruff voice of the Doctor answered almost immediately.

"Doctor, we are ready to leave, and I seem to recall that you used to come up to the Bridge and watch launching procedures. If you would care to join us...."

"Oh....er....yes, yes, thank you, Spock....on my way." Clearly, the good Doctor had been taken aback by the unexpected invitation.

Sulu and Farrell exchanged a sidelong glance, while the Communications Officer grinned openly. Like all the Enterprise regulars, she anticipated with some amusement the reactions of Doctor McCoy to the new status of his old sparring-partner. It would certainly be worth watching.

She greeted McCoy with her brightest smile when he emerged from the lift, an expression both perplexed and pleased on his face. He smiled back at her, with a wink for good measure, and looked down uncertainly at the man in the command chair.

The Vulcan, without a glance behind, said smoothly, "Ah, here you are, Doctor. All right, Mr Sulu, take us out. Ahead one quarter impulse power."

"Aye, sir, one quarter impulse."

As the mighty vessel moved forward the Doctor, after a glance around, moved down onto the lower Bridge, to stand at his old place by the Captain's chair. Although Spock's attention never left the viewscreen on which the dock structures were seen receding behind them, the Doctor felt somehow that he was welcome, and a warm glow of satisfaction suffused him.

Well, after all, he thought, it's good to be back, and pretty decent of Spock to remember old traditions and invite me to the Bridge. He shot a brief glance at the imperturbable, clear-cut profile beside him, then turned his attention to the main screen and the huge gates of the dockyards looming just ahead of them.

Everyone watched as the gates slowly parted to let the Enterprise glide majestically through and emerge from the docks. The more seasoned space travellers were always moved when facing the awesome display of star-spangled space, and the cadets heard, as in a dream, the Helmsman announce, "We are clear of the gate, Captain."

"Full impulse power, Mr Sulu, and give us departure angle on screen."

"Aye, sir." At once, the star field shimmered away and was replaced with the sight of the orbital docks, lit up like a huge Christmas tree, and sparkling against the dark globe of Earth, just outlined by the bright halo of the hidden sun. It was truly beautiful, and a hush fell on the Bridge as they watched what to most of the crew was their home planet gradually fall back behind them and then fade from view.

The spell was broken by Commander Sulu's voice: "Which course, Captain?"

"What do you suggest, Mr Sulu?"

The Helmsman grinned happily. "The Grand Tour, Captain, as usual?"

"By all means, Mr Sulu....as usual." (*Was there a faint tremor in the Vulcan's voice? McCoy wondered.*) "Take us out, warp factor one. Mr Farrell, when we are clear of the solar system plot a course bearing...."

"Aye, sir," two brisk voices replied simultaneously, as the powerful Starship gathered speed.

McCoy could not conceal his curiosity. "'The Grand Tour', Spock?" he asked, sotto voce. "What's that?"

The Captain turned an impassive face in his direction, but there was definitely a humorous spark lurking in the depths of those dark eyes. "The Grand Tour, Doctor, is what you might call a 'scenic route' across your solar system, as devised by Mr Sulu, and which we offer the students at the start of each training cruise. I consider it to be beneficial for beginners to see their home world from another angle. Don't you agree, Doctor?"

"Oh....quite, yes, I see what you mean," replied the intrigued Doctor, who, during the next half hour or so could not but approve of the pedagogic methods of Spock, and appreciate his pragmatic ways of initiating his students, from the start, in the wonders of the Universe. No doubt about it, the cruise promised to be interesting.

Under the expert control of Commander Sulu the Enterprise, having left behind the red sphere of Mars and its artificial satellites, then negotiated the asteroid belt, was now approaching the awesome form of Jupiter with its retinue of Galilean moons. To some fanciful trainees, the colourful patterns of the stormy planet looked like a gigantic strawberry sorbet laced with cream and cherry sauce, and the image all but made them water at the mouth.

At that very moment, as if on cue, a yeoman appeared from nowhere and began handing round cups of coffee from a tray she carried. She came to McCoy.

"Coffee, Doctor?"

"Good idea, thank you, my dear."

"Captain, your fruit juice."

"Thank you, Yeoman."

"Why....some people receive preferential treatment here."

McCoy's jest was received with perfect composure. "Captain's prerogative, Doctor," the Vulcan retorted, sipping his juice unconcernedly.

Sulu chuckled as he deftly manoeuvred the ship beyond the gravitational pull of Jupiter, then, with the mastery of a veteran ace, he sent her 180 degrees about, speeding through space to the strangest planet in all the solar system: Saturn.

They all watched entranced as the orange sphere of the planet, circled in rainbow stripes, suddenly came into view, seemingly growing so huge as to almost fill the screen. The Doctor heaved a sigh and noticed with interest the thoughtful expression of the Captain gazing at the sight.

"Come on, Spock," he quipped under his breath. "Don't tell me that you're still 'fascinated' by that! You've seen it a hundred times if you've seen it once!"

His eyes never leaving the screen, Spock replied, "So I have, Doctor. But let me tell you one thing: when I cease to marvel at the wonders of space, such as that planet, it will be time for me to resign."

"Is that so?" McCoy glanced at the austere profile and grinned good-humouredly. "You have a point there, and I suppose this show" (he gestured at the screen) "you're giving the kids is meant to.... er....stimulate youth's natural propensity for wonder and enthusiasm?"

"Precisely, Doctor. I consider that space should not be taken for granted."

"Well," drawled McCoy as he casually looked around, "from what I can see here, you've so far scored bang on target, Captain!"

The Vulcan made a non-committal grunt, and when Saturn had faded away in a riot of colours, and the bluish dots of Uranus and Neptune hovered in the distant void, he ordered the Helmsman, "When we are clear of the system, Commander, give us warp four point five, on the course plotted by Mr Farrell; and let your trainee take the helm," he added, with a glance at the youth standing transfixed behind the console.

"Aye, sir; we're almost there," said Sulu, checking his instruments.

"Well, I think it's time for me to...." the Doctor began as he turned to leave, but he stopped in his tracks when a trainee at Communications announced breathlessly,

"A message coming in, Captain....from Starfleet, sir!" After listening intently on his earset and glancing questioningly at Uhura, he confirmed, "It's a call from Admiral Kirk, sir."

An excited stir ran through the Bridge, echoed by a joyful, "Well, I'll be damned!" from Doctor McCoy, who returned at once to the Captain's side.

Spock calmly ordered, "On screen, Cadet."

The stars slowly dissolved, to be replaced by the face of Jim Kirk, who broke into a smile at the sight of his friend.

"Hello, Spock! Thought I'd wave you goodbye before you lose sight of our shores."

"Admiral. This is most kind of you," the Vulcan replied formally.

"Sorry I was unable to see you off, had a staff meeting at the wrong time. How are things on board?"

"So far, as well as may be expected, Admiral," Spock said serenely, while making a sign to Uhura. She was ready, and switched the cameras to let the Admiral have a full view of the Bridge. His eyes shone with a touch of emotion as they glanced over his former domain, lighting on his old comrades, to finally rest on McCoy, standing by Spock's side.

"Hi, Bones! I see you've resumed your customary place. Good to see you there again."

"I sure have, Jim. I only wish I could say the same of you."

An elusive shadow crossed Kirk's face. "Ah well....I may be able to make it next time and join you for the next training cruise,

as inspecting officer....or Starfleet observer."

"You know that's not what I meant, Jim!" McCoy cut in bluntly, but Spock, sensing Kirk's annoyance, swiftly intervened.

"We shall look forward to the honour of your visit, Admiral. I shall send my first report in three days' time."

"Very good, Spock. Well, good luck and bon voyage to you all. Take care of yourselves. Kirk out!" His image disappeared abruptly, as though the connection had suddenly been broken, and once more the starry field of the Milky Way filled the screen.

The Doctor cleared his throat. "Well, that's that. I'd better go back to my den now. Thank you all for the....sight-seeing!"

He went up the steps, but at the turbolift he turned.

"By the way, Captain, when do your drills, or manoeuvres, or whatever, start?"

"Not for another two point four five hours, Doctor. Why do you ask?"

"Because I'd better have Sickbay prepared and standing by....just in case!" With that parting shot, he stepped into the lift, and before the doors closed had time to get a glimpse of a raised eyebrow, and hear the deep voice pronounce, "Captain's log, Stardate...."

As the lift carried him swiftly down to G-deck and Sickbay, the Doctor leaned against the wall and grinned to himself. Yeah, it was good to be back....*good old Spock, same as ever, thank God! Too bad about Jim, though.*

Meanwhile, many decks below, a dark figure, silent as a shadow, was creeping out of the deserted galley, loaded with cans and boxes, and tiptoeing along the corridor, as stealthily as a cat.

And in one of the crew's cabins, on deck seven, a lonely and restive feline was killing time by sharpening its claws on the padded seat of an armchair.

CHAPTER III

Three days and several drills later a meeting of the Department Heads in the main Briefing Room, presided over by Captain Spock, was nearing its end. For the last hour the performance and comportment of the trainees had been under discussion, the officers concerned giving their views on the results obtained so far by their students. On the whole, they agreed that the routine and regulations of the ship were generally well-accepted by most of the cadets, who had adapted themselves rapidly to the common life and discipline aboard.

As was to be expected, though, Doctor McCoy raised objections.

"You know," he declared, "seems to me that you're pushing them more than is good for them. If these kids get overtired now they won't last the next three weeks. For instance, that emergency drill last night; why did you have it repeated three times, Spock?"

"Because, Doctor, the result of the first two drills was

unsatisfactory," the Vulcan replied tersely.

"Come on, Spock! You can't possibly expect one hundred percent efficiency ratings from beginners! I thought eighty-two percent was quite good, considering...."

"No, Doctor McCoy, it was far from good. We must reach ninety percent or higher in the first week, and the maximum by the end of the training. The safety of the ship and the lives of her crew may depend on a difference of those few percentage points, and the sooner the students are aware of that fact, the better."

There was an awkward pause, then McCoy heaved an exasperated sigh and conceded, "Okay, I know I'm new on this training stunt, and I know the cadets haven't come on a pleasure cruise, that's for sure, but I take leave to remind you that I'm responsible for the health of the crew, and to warn you not to demand too much of these youngsters."

In the ensuing silence, the Captain regarded McCoy speculatively.

"Explain, Doctor. Did you observe any sign of stress or discontent? Have you heard any complaints?"

"Complaints? No, so far they seem happy enough from what I've seen, but stress....yes. I have noticed unmistakable signs of fatigue among those who, for one reason or another, keep coming to Sickbay."

"But Doctor," Uhura pointed out, "what's wrong with that? If, out of one hundred and thirty-five trainees, most of whom are on their first deep-space voyage, about half a dozen come to you, we can consider it a very good rating. In my section they're in great shape, eager and ready for anything."

"What about your students, gentlemen?" asked Spock, looking around the table.

"Same with mine, sir," Sulu declared.

"And mine," chimed in Mr Scott. "As I already told you, Captain, I'm very pleased with the lot I've got this time. They're nice lads and lassies, and keen as mustard."

A murmur of common assent followed his words, and Spock turned his gaze back to the Doctor.

"All right," the latter drawled. "If you say so....maybe I am imagining things, but how do you account for the recurrent visits of the same four trainees, three girls and a boy, who keep complaining of headache, nausea, stomach-ache, etcetera? And it has nothing to do with space-sickness, mind you; it's more like symptoms of nervous disorder. One of them is so hypersensitive as to have me wonder about her: her psyche tests prove her to be highly emotionally vulnerable. Her name's...." - he checked his data-pad - "....Vera Vatanen. You know the one I mean, Captain?"

"Perfectly, Doctor. Miss Vatanen was in my class, and appeared to be a very promising student, quiet and studious. Naturally, the conditions here on the ship are different from those at the Academy; however....I wonder.... She is in your department, Mr Schwarzenberg. Are you able to explain her present behaviour; have

you noticed anything anomalous?"

"Not particularly, Captain," the Science Officer replied stiffly. "Otherwise, I would have reported it at once. Cadet Vatanen does indeed seem nervous and inattentive, and at times I have had to take her to task for her lack of accuracy, but I'm sure that with the proper tuition and strict discipline I shall obtain from her the excellent performance expected from a Starfleet trainee. You can leave it to me, sir!"

"Hey, wait a minute!" McCoy protested, before Spock had time to reply. "Take it easy with that girl, will you? Didn't you hear what I just said? Vatanen is at present on the verge of sinking into a depressive state, and if you treat her high-handedly she's liable to break down before we know where we are!"

"Thank you, Doctor," Schwarzenberg retorted icily. "But may I remind you that I have been engaged in Academy training for longer than you, and I am known for always obtaining good results, so may I be presumed to know my job, and how to cope with this kind of problem?"

"Good God, man!" the Doctor burst out. "She's just a girl, not one of your damned computers! You can't handle her like your machines when they break down. Of all the heartless, unfeeling devils! But what else would you expect from science experts? It goes with the calling, of course! I'm surprised you don't have pointed ears, Lieutenant!"

With this unexpected outburst, Doctor McCoy finally ran out of steam, and, after a second's uncertainty, his fellow officers broke up and dissolved into laughter. The sight of Schwarzenberg, a study in stupefaction and righteous indignation, and that of Spock, head tilted, eyebrow on the rise, was too much for them.

The good-natured laughter noticeably eased the tension, and gave the Captain time to regain control of the discussion. With a sweeping frosty glare - belied, however, by the slight twitch of his lips - he at last obtained silence.

"Gentleman, Commander Uhura, if you please...."

Then, turning to the Science Officer, Spock proceeded to explain. "Mr Schwarzenberg, you will be obliged, I am afraid, to accustom yourself to the irrational ways of our Chief Surgeon, and to put up with his hasty temper and rather....forceful and graphic mode of speech."

"Now, look here, Spock!" McCoy bristled.

"Captain!" Schwarzenberg stuttered. "I have never been spoken to in this offensive manner, and I'm damned if I'll put up with it!"

"Gentlemen!" The biting tone and chilly stare at once quenched any attempt at argument. He resumed. "As I was saying, the Doctor's ways are often unpredictable, even offensive; I speak advisedly, from long experience as Science Officer of this vessel."

A stifled chuckle from down the table was ignored, and Spock continued imperturbably, "On the other hand, Lieutenant, Doctor McCoy's expertise and competence as Ship's Surgeon and space psychologist are unequalled in the Fleet; therefore, I strongly advise you to heed his recommendations regarding the health and

welfare of the crew, and of your trainees in particular."

"Why, Captain!" the Doctor beamed. "It's good of you to...."

"As for you, Doctor," Spock cut him short, "I would recommend you to keep in mind that Lieutenant Schwarzenberg has his duties to perform. As you rightly said a moment ago, this is not a pleasure cruise. Our cadets are here to learn and practise, but - and this concerns us all - " (Spock swept a meaningful glance around the circle of attentive officers) "let us ensure that in endeavouring to obtain the maximum efficiency from them, we do so with discretion. I do not need to remind you that we are dealing with Human trainees, who are therefore entitled to some understanding, even leniency, from their instructors. Is that clear, gentlemen? Mr Schwarzenberg?"

Spock received nods and smiles of assent from everyone, and a short, "Yes, sir," from the sullen Science Officer.

"Good," he concluded. "Doctor, I am relying on you to keep me informed of the health status of the cadets, particularly those four just mentioned."

"Of course, Captain," McCoy replied grumpily. "That's what I'm here for."

Ignoring the patent ill-humour of the two officers, Spock calmly continued, "Then that is all on that subject. Are there any questions? Anything further?"

A hand was raised across the table. "Yes, Mr Killikranky?"

"I just want to report, Captain, some petty larceny reported to me by the Quartermaster. Oh, nothing important, sir. He's missing mostly food, some odds and ends, and a couple of blankets. He only found out last night, sir. He believes it to be just plain pilfering, says it happens occasionally."

"But," Sulu wondered, with a laugh, "who would want to steal food, when all they have to do is order whatever they like from the food-processors? It's ridiculous!"

Spock looked thoughtful. "So it would seem, Mr Sulu, unless the thief, whoever he or she may be, had good reason to do so.... unless, for instance, they cannot have access to any food-processor....and there is also the case of the missing blankets." The Vulcan mused for a few seconds, then pressed a button on the Comm-device in front of him. "Security?"

"O'Brien here, Captain."

"Why are you on watch today, Ensign?"

"Sorry, sir, but the Chief asked me to swap days with her; she'll take my turn tomorrow."

"I see....well, since you are in charge, Mr O'Brien, take a detail of five men with you, go to the Quartermaster on my behalf, and find out what exactly has been occurring with the thefts that he has reported. If necessary, conduct a discreet inquiry among ship's personnel and a search through the lower decks, beginning with level seventeen. You are looking for signs of an illicit presence. Keep me informed of your progress at all times."

"Aye, sir. Begging your pardon, sir....you mean....an intruder aboard?" O'Brien sounded excited.

"Unknown, Ensign," Spock replied calmly "It is, so far, an hypothesis. It is up to you to investigate and to find evidence, if any. All that I require for the present is facts. Spock out."

As soon as the comm-link was closed, McCoy pounced.

"Don't you think your suspicions are a bit far-fetched, Spock? Why, those things might just have been misplaced, or a crewman who doesn't care for sterilised food as produced by the processors might have fancied something else, and I wouldn't blame him! An intruder, you say. Where from? Or could it be that you're playing a hunch, Captain?" The Doctor's blue eyes sparkled with mischief.

The Vulcan favoured him with an enigmatic gaze, and coolly replied. "Perhaps I am, Doctor. However, Vulcans do not rely on 'hunches', as you are well aware. They judge by and act upon facts, and the theft of food and blankets, when anyone may obtain them merely on request, is a rather disturbing fact, although additional data is required before any further action is taken. Mr Schwarzenberg, initiate full sensor scans of the ship. I shall join you on the Bridge shortly." Spock rose to his feet and the others followed suit. "That will be all, gentlemen, Commander. Doctor.... a word with you.... Yes, Ms Uhura?"

"I just wanted to remind everyone that Communications is giving a party tonight, in the lounge on deck sixteen, starting at change of shift. Nothing formal, just a get-together, a few drinks.... you're all cordially invited. That goes for you, too, of course, Captain. Please, sir, do come, even if it's only for a few minutes. Everyone will be so disappointed if you don't." Uhura flashed her sweetest smile at the Vulcan, who was renowned for avoiding social gatherings.

Spock, reluctant either to accept or to cause Uhura displeasure, finally replied with his usual courtesy. "If I have the time, Commander, I shall be honoured to accept your invitation."

"Splendid, Captain!"

"You can rely on us not to miss your party, Uhura," Mr Scott declared heartily, and they filed out noisily, leaving Captain and Doctor facing each other across the table. A few seconds passed as the two men eyed each other speculatively; then, after clearing his throat, McCoy made the first move.

"Well, Spock?"

"Well, Doctor McCoy?" Deadpan.

The Doctor bristled. "You wanted to see me in private, didn't you? To tell me off good and proper, I suppose?"

The Vulcan, hands clasped behind his back, squared his shoulders and regarded the bellicose Doctor from beneath raised eyebrows.

"Why should I wish to do that, Doctor? I am not in the habit of issuing reprimands unless justified, and I do not believe that such is the case."

"Oh...." A rather deflated McCoy could find nothing to say.

"I requested your continuing presence only to warn you against provoking Mr Schwarzenberg, for any reason whatsoever."

"Ah!" exclaimed McCoy, his old self again. "That Schwarz.... what's his name? Schwarzenberg? It's a case of petty tyranny if ever I saw one! That man is a martinet; I know the type! Wherever did you pick him up, Spock? In some backwater garrison?"

"I wish you would refrain from these irrational flights of fancy; I did not 'pick him up', Doctor. Starfleet appointed Lieutenant Schwarzenberg to the position of Science Instructor due to his capabilities. He is Junior Instructor at the Academy, and is an efficient teacher, but being of a rigid disposition, is a stern and exacting tutor, and as you observed, does not appreciate any remark, be it humorous or otherwise, made about him. He has a tendency to take any such remarks in earnest."

"Oh Lord!" McCoy moaned. "That's all we need now - a Science Officer with no sense of humour. Reminds me of a certain Vulcan of my acquaintance, at the start of the five-year mission. Took him some time to learn how to take a joke, didn't it, Spock? Ah.... those were the days."

"Indeed, Doctor, but those days are gone, and we have the present to consider, therefore I repeat my recommendation to avoid any confrontation with Lieutenant Schwarzenberg which could only lead to regrettable unpleasantness. Do I make myself clear, Doctor?"

"Quite, Captain, sir! I'll bite my tongue - or better still, I'll just keep right away from him. D'you know, Spock, now that I think about it, I wouldn't be surprised if all my young patients come from the science department. What do you bet me?"

"Gambling is illogical, Doctor, and in this case unnecessary, since it is highly likely that they do. I have observed in the past that Mr Schwarzenberg's methods usually provoke a negative reaction from cadets during the early days of a cruise."

"My God, Spock! You're almost as callous as Schwarz! Try to remember that they're only kids and can't...."

"Let us not re-open a pointless discussion, Doctor," Spock cut in firmly. "If you would tend to the health of the crew, I shall attend to the smooth running of the ship. If any problem arises Mr Schwarzenberg will be duly called to order, but I must ask you not to interfere. Is that understood, or must I make it an order?"

A pause followed as the two of them glared at each other, then the Vulcan stiffly turned on his heel and strode to the door.

"If you will excuse me, Doctor, I am expected on the Bridge."

His keen hearing, however, caught a mutter behind him which halted him in his tracks.

"Well, well, well. Our Vulcan First Officer has come a long way, to be sure!" McCoy drawled, caustically. "Look at him now....bossy, overbearing....he certainly knows how to command now!"

Spock swung round, his expression glacial. "Explain, Doctor!"

"Oh, nothing important, Spock. I just realised how much more confident and self-assured you appear now as Captain of the Enterprise, rather than when you were in command as First Officer. The Galileo, for instance, on that planet....remember?"

Spock favoured the Doctor with a stony glare. "Perfectly, Doctor. I also recall that you did your best to undermine my authority each time that I made a Command decision."

"Tut tut....resentment, Spock? Not very Vulcan of you!" The Doctor continued his prodding relentlessly. "But of course, now's the chance to take your revenge, isn't it? At last, you're the Captain, the sole master of the Enterprise. Be honest....isn't that what you always wanted, for all your protestations to the contrary? With Jim safely out of the way and you in the command chair, you rule the roost, don't you, Captain?"

With ashen face and clenched jaw, Spock was visibly fighting for control. After a few tense seconds he heaved a shuddering breath, and tightly replied, "Doctor McCoy, will you please get it into your head that I am only temporarily in command of the ship, as a teacher in command of training for the Academy. The Enterprise is not mine, she is Jim's; I have taken her into my keeping until Jim is able to take her back. I have never wished for command, nor do I now!"

The briefing room door snapped open, and in a flash, he was gone.

The Chief Medical Officer, his fight snuffed out all at once, was left alone, mortified, and annoyed with himself. "Serves me right!" he muttered under his breath. "What's come over me, anyway? Nagging at Spock, dragging Jim into it.... Ah well...." and he went back to Sickbay in a rather dispirited state of mind.

When the end of the day watch arrived, the results of Ensign O'Brien's investigations amounted practically to nil. As was to be expected none of the crew were found guilty of pilfering, and furthermore no trace of any undesirable presence had, so far, been detected, either by search or sensor scan. The missing items might just have been misplaced, the Quartermaster's statement notwithstanding. Captain Spock, however, well aware that some remote regions of the enormous ship were not covered by intra-ship sensors, ordered the continuation of the search, and recommended caution and vigilance to the crew, although he did not deem it necessary to put the ship on red alert until evidence could be found of the supposed intruder.

After the long busy day the cadets were all weary, but not so much as to want to miss the Communications party, and on decks six and seven in particular everyone was getting ready for a quick supper followed by an evening of fun and enjoyment. The Captain had excused them all from night duty, and one and all were in high spirits.

Bubbling with excitement, Joyce Garrick finally dived into her cabin, threw her uniform jacket on the bed and, tugging at her boots, shouted to her room-mate, "You there, Alison? Can I use the shower?"

A tired mumble was the only response that she got from the

adjoining room. Surprised, she got to her feet, and peered around the edge of the doorway to find her friend, still in uniform, slumped full-length on her bed, her eyes shut, and Cherie-Belle, purring loudly, clasped to her bosom.

"Hey! Are you all right?"

Alison opened one eye. "Hmmm?"

"Good grief, you look fagged out! What's wrong?"

"I feel fagged out, and I'll be even more fagged out by the end of the cruise," poor Alison murmured disconsolately.

"I see," Joyce nodded wisely, and sat down on the edge of the bed. "Schwarz the Menace on the rampage again?"

"Who else? Joyce, he's driving us crazy! Even the boys, Kovack and Ferrier, and the rest, are all fed up with him. Why can't he understand that we'd manage better without having him constantly breathing down our necks? And as for Vatanen....poor girl, she really is good, you know, but the way he snaps at her turns her into jelly....oh dear!"

A deep, despondent sigh escaped her, and she went on, "We were warned about him, you know, but we never guessed.... Oh, why can't we have Spock? Okay, he's strict and demanding, but he's always courteous and understanding, nothing like Schwarzenberg. Ugh!"

"Come on, Alison, be sensible! You can't expect Spock to be on the Bridge and in Sciences both at once. He's the Captain here, not just a teacher.... But, I say! Why don't you tell him?"

"Eh?" Alison opened her eyes.

"I mean, why don't you tell the Captain about Schwarz? I think he ought to know."

Cadet Gordon sat up in a flash, spilling the cat in the process. "Are you daft, Joyce? Can you imagine me, poor little me, complaining to the Captain about a senior officer? I can't! It's unthinkable!"

"Well, I think he'll soon find out, one way or the other, so I wouldn't worry. Come on!" Joyce stood up briskly. "We'd better make a move, or we won't have time to grab a bite before the party."

"Ah....the party.... Sorry, Joyce, I don't think I'll go. I'm just not in the mood, and I feel done in."

"Nonsense! You can't miss the party; anyway, you don't want to miss him, do you?"

"Who?"

"Him....your precious Vulcan! Who else?! Uhura says most of the officers are coming - Mr Scott, Killy, Doctor McCoy of course, and even that superwoman Caromandel."

"And the Captain too?" asked Alison, swinging her feet to the deck.

"Sure. Uhura said he almost promised to come, though he seldom

does, because generally parties aren't his cup of tea, she says. Hurry up, we've got to change. You shower first, while I feed my kitty-puss. Here, Cherie-Belle, come along...." The lively girl picked up her cat and went back to her preparations.

"Joyce!" came the sudden, panic-stricken cry. "What shall I wear?"

Joyce smiled at her room-mate's obvious revival, and offered her advice. "Nothing too formal, just a nice dress... Um, I don't know.... Oh, what about that silky green thing of yours? That would be just the right colour!"

"Right colour for what?" came the puzzled question.

"Can't you see? That shade of green almost exactly matches your Vulcan's complexion!"

Alison giggled. "Really, Joyce! How can you be so silly?! And he's not that green!"

"Silly, am I? Well, take it from me, my pet, you'd better do yourself up, because there'll be close competition tonight - and that includes Ms High and Mighty Caromandel."

"Whatever do you mean?" retorted Alison.

"I mean that our Security Chief is head over heels in love with the Captain. How do I know? Grapevine, my dear, and my own observation. Anyone can see it - just watch her tonight, it's as plain as the nose on your face."

"No! That woman? Impossible! Anyway, I'm sure it's not returned - she's not his type at all." She paused. "Yes, I think I *will* wear the green dress...."

The rest of her speech was drowned out in the rush of water, and Joyce chuckled; her ruse had worked perfectly. Strange how her friend had suddenly shed her fatigue and despondency....

Propped against the bar, and nursing a glass of brandy, Doctor McCoy was benevolently surveying the happy crew assembled in the lounge. There was much chatter and laughter, and one boy had brought his guitar along; some people had started singing. No doubt about it, Uhura knew how to throw a congenial and successful party.

The Doctor's reflections were interrupted by Sulu and Farrell, seeking a drink from the bar.

"Enjoying yourself, Doctor?" Sulu grinned.

"Very much," McCoy nodded. "Nice to see the kids so relaxed after the stresses of the day; Uhura has a knack of putting everyone at ease."

"Reminds me of the fun we used to have in the old rec-room," Farrell said, looking around the room. "It might not have been as glitzy as this get-up, but we had a good time."

"Makes you nostalgic, doesn't it?" the Doctor nodded, then, changing tone, "Do you think Spock will come? I know Uhura's

expecting him, but knowing our Vulcan, I rather doubt it."

"Oh, I think he will, Doctor," Sulu remarked with a knowing smile. "Later, probably, and not for long, but he'll make an appearance. He usually does when Uhura entertains."

"Do you mean to say you usually have these parties on training cruises?" McCoy sounded surprised.

Sulu chuckled softly. "We certainly do. It's part of Spock's training methods; hard work when on duty, then relaxation and fun whenever possible off duty."

"Well I'll be damned! He's certainly changed his style. But why didn't he mention it at the briefing?"

Sulu was wearing an enigmatic smile. "Can't say, Doctor. Maybe he wanted to surprise you. You'll see, there've been quite a few changes."

McCoy's inevitable grumble about a certain pointy-eared Captain drew a laugh from Farrell, who was revelling in the 'Enterprise spirit', but he steered the conversation onto a more immediate topic.

"Have you noticed the trainees....how they've done themselves up? Amazing the difference nice clothes can make. Some of the girls are just as pretty as they make them!"

"Yes, aren't they?" Sulu grinned appreciatively. "Personally, I rather fancy those three over there, especially the brunette in green."

"Now, now, gentlemen, behave yourselves! Remember Starfleet Regulations and Ethics!" chided the Doctor in mock disapproval. "By the way, who's that stunning Amazon in the blue outfit? Quite a girl! And that red hair!" He waved his glass in the direction of a tall and shapely young woman who was chatting with Killikranky.

"You haven't met our Security Chief, then, Doctor?" Sulu and Farrell exchanged a knowing glance. "That is Lieutenant Caromandel, better known as Caro, champion bodybuilder, expert in karate, judo, and more besides. You seem quite taken with the lady, Doctor," Sulu teased. "I would never have thought her to be your type!"

"I'll have you know that I don't favour a 'type', Mr Sulu! Actually, I haven't any particular preference; they're all worth looking at, but that lieutenant of yours....well...."

"Sorry, Doctor," Farrell intervened. "I'm afraid you don't stand a chance. Her....er....interests definitely lie elsewhere - don't they, Sulu?" The two men chuckled, obviously sharing a private joke.

Before the curious Doctor could demand an explanation, Uhura's voice broke in on their conversation.

"What are you three doing over there, propping up the bar and plotting in your corner? Come and join us! Doctor, please, take a seat."

The three officers left the bar, and McCoy took his place on the couch. They had hardly settled down when a small commotion drew

all attention towards the turbolift; it was the arrival of Mr Scott and some of his Engineering staff, all apparently in a very good mood.

"Here we are, Uhura," the Chief announced genially. "Sorry to be late; fact is, we got a bit delayed....didn't we, lads?" Then, his attention suddenly caught by the lavish display of drinks, "Aha! What have we over there, now?" and Mr Scott made a beeline for the bar.

"Anything you care for, Scotty? Just help yourselves, gentlemen, and come and join us."

Their hostess, resplendent in an exotic robe, sank gracefully onto the couch next to McCoy, and by and by, as though moved by an irresistible gravitational pull, the trainees found themselves in orbit around the senior officers. They all made themselves comfortable, sitting on stools, draped over the backs of armchairs, sitting cross-legged on the floor.

Mr Scott, sipping the Scotch that Uhura had had the foresight to provide, looked round appreciatively and declared with a grin, "Nice bunch of cadets, aren't they? But where's the Captain, Uhura? I thought he said he was coming."

"He will, Scotty, eventually. Has anybody seen him lately?"

"He left the Bridge about fifteen minutes ago," volunteered Ensign Kettenring, who had perched himself on the arm of the couch.

"Oh well, just give him time, then."

"What for, Uhura? To make his mind up?" McCoy asked, under his breath.

"Now, Doctor, don't start that! If Spock possibly can come, he will, take it from me."

"All right, ma'am, just as you say." McCoy grinned disarmingly.

By this time, however, the noise level of the room had gone up a notch, and the Chief Engineer was being respectfully but firmly reminded by his junior officers of his earlier promise to continue the story of one of the hair-raising escapades that the ship had been in during the five year mission. The fate of the Enterprise and her entire crew had actually hung on the simple inversion of the poles on one of Mr Scott's devices.

"Aye," he nodded wisely. "That was a close thing. Me in the Jeffries tube, sweating blood to fix the darned thing, and Mr Spock on the intercom, cool as you please, telling me to make haste! That's an experience I'm not likely to forget as long as I draw breath!"

"Same here," Uhura agreed with feeling. "Believe me, the tension was crackling on the Bridge - except for Spock, of course. But you and the Doctor were planetside with Captain Kirk, weren't you, Sulu?"

"We certainly were, and we had our own share of trouble, I can tell you, doing our best to shake off Losira. She'd already killed D'Amato, and we were next in line. If Mr Spock hadn't beamed down

in the nick of time.... But you know, I've always felt sorry about her. She was so deadly, and yet so beautiful; don't you agree, Doctor?"

"Sulu, for Heaven's sake! You're forgetting that the woman was nothing more than an image produced by a crazy computer," McCoy scoffed.

"Quite right!" Scotty agreed. "A computer that propelled the ship a thousand light years and all but blew up my engines!"

By then everyone's curiosity was piqued, and Mr Scott, bombarded with questions and pleas for more of the story - and secretly gratified by the interest - complied gracefully.

"All right, all right! Since you all want to know....but it's rather a long tale, so you'd best make yourselves comfy. And somebody bring me another drink first. Thank you. Well, to begin at the beginning, we were sitting in orbit around that planet, and Captain Kirk and his landing party were ready to beam down...."

When, fifteen minutes later, Spock finally made his way to the party - firmly determined to stay not one second longer than necessary, since his experience of such gatherings was of painful amounts of noise and unbridled merriment - the unexpected hush which met his ears when he reached the lounge made him stop short in surprise. His eyebrows slowly rose at the sight of the rapt assembly gathered around the Chief Engineer, who seemed to be holding the floor.

As his presence went unnoticed at first the Captain remained standing silently by the door and listened with much interest as Mr Scott, with consummate skill, revealed the climax of a thrilling tale, describing in graphic terms his unforgettable experience in the Jeffries tube, where he was fixing the fault with just a few seconds to save the ship from annihilation.

"....and that did the trick," Scotty concluded with a touch of smugness. "That brainwave of our Science Officer's, to invert the poles, just saved the day, and us by the same token!"

A collective sigh of relief followed his tale, and in the ensuing silence one of his team thoughtfully remarked, "Amazing how a small thing like that can make all the difference, isn't it?"

Murmurs and nods of assent met his comment, but the astute Mr Scott didn't miss the chance to make a point.

"That's just it, you never can tell! That's why I keep telling you all that whatever skill and knowledge you acquire will all come to nought if you don't use your grey matter. You have a brain, and you should use it, dammit! And now, Jacky, lad, get me another Scotch, will you? My throat is parched with all this talking."

In the ensuing laughter and chatter the presence of Spock was finally perceived, and an instant silence descended on the room. The crew scrambled to their feet and made way for the Captain as Uhura smiled and greeted him.

"Ah, there you are, sir. Welcome to the party; please come and have a seat."

The Vulcan moved slowly forward, and in no time found himself

comfortably seated in an armchair, a chilled drink at his elbow, while the attentive circle re-formed around himself and his officers. As he picked up his glass and eyed its pink contents somewhat doubtfully, a voice at his side said shyly, "It's just a fruit cocktail, Captain."

He nodded his thanks and took a cautious sip. It was surprisingly good. Looking up into the grey eyes of the girl in green, he asked, "Is this of your making?"

"Yes, sir, I.... I took the liberty...." she stammered.

"I find this beverage most refreshing; thank you, Cadet."

Even if the Vulcan hardly noticed the pretty face blushing with gratification, it was not missed by the suspicious eyes of the Security Chief, who had watched the byplay between Captain and cadet with growing irritation. For a few seconds the two girls eyed each other speculatively, then Caromandel looked disdainfully away and, deliberately ignoring that chit of a girl, turned her attention back to Spock. The latter, unaware of being the innocent cause of female rivalry, was listening to Commander Uhura's explanations.

"Captain, you've found us deep in tales of the past. It's supposed to be a sure sign of old age, but we love to talk of the good old days, and Scotty promised these youngsters some stories of the Enterprise. They seem to be enjoying it; they're even asking for more!" She laughed.

"So I see, Commander," Spock remarked blandly. "I was, however, unaware that we had a skilled story-teller in our midst. Possibly your talents are wasted in Engineering, Mr Scott."

"Ah, now, Captain," Scotty beamed with pleasure at the Vulcan's praise, "it's real kind of you to say that, but it's not down to me. You see, it kind of runs in the family; all the Aberdeen Scotts have been great yarn-spinners."

"Yarn, Mr Scott? Spinning?" The Captain arched a questioning eyebrow.

"Och, sorry, sir. Just a manner of speaking; it means 'story-teller'.... I was just telling the lads and lasses here about Losira and that computer that you destroyed just in the nick of time."

"Indeed. It was, of course, necessary, but truly unfortunate; the computer was the only remaining example of the scientific achievements of the extinct Kalandans," Spock said regretfully.

"Well, we can count ourselves lucky that he decided we were more worth rescuing than that piece of hardware." McCoy's drawl broke into the ensuing pause, provoking a ripple of laughter among the audience, with the notable exception of the Vulcan, who remained quite unperturbed.

Mr Scott, visibly delighted with his successful role as narrator, resumed. "I was about to recall, with your permission, Captain, that feat of yours on Murasaki 312, when the Galileo had barely escaped the pull of Taurus II's gravity. Do you know what the Captain did?" he asked the company at large. "He jettisoned all the remaining fuel from the shuttle's tanks!"

If Scotty had anticipated a response to his preposterous revelation, he was not disappointed; exclamations of disbelief, questions and laughter broke out. What he had not expected was the reactions of the Doctor, sitting beside him, and Spock, sitting opposite. The two suddenly stiffened and stared at each other.

Oh oh! he thought. Now, there's a pretty kettle of fish! Behind his bluff front the Chief Engineer was actually a perceptive and sensitive person, and he felt a certain tension arise. *Seems to me that the Murasaki episode still rankles with those two.... damn! Too late now to keep quiet. I'd best watch my step.*

Assuming a quizzical expression he continued, "Ah, now, that's got you guessing! You're wondering whether I'm pulling your legs, perhaps? But no, it's the truth. Ask the Doctor - he was there!"

Encouraged by a nudge from his neighbour McCoy heaved a deep sigh, rolled up his eyes, and drily declared, "Yeah, so I was, for my sins! One of the biggest scares I ever had."

Curiosity and excitement having reached a peak, Scotty judged that his audience was about ready for the epic story, and he looked across at Spock. "Shall I tell them, Captain?" Receiving a nod of assent, he launched into the tale of the Murasaki incident.

"Well, the Enterprise was en route to Marcus III, when we encountered Murasaki 312, and Captain Kirk decided to send out an exploratory team in a shuttlecraft. Then, suddenly...."

Both Captain and Doctor would, for personal reasons, have preferred the unfortunate episode to be forgotten, and couldn't help but feel somewhat uneasy at the unfolding of their adventures. Their apprehension proved to be unfounded, however, as Mr Scott wisely omitted to mention the grave dissension which had split the landing party and threatened Spock's command. On the contrary, he chose to dwell on the description of the gigantic natives and the desperate situation of the Galileo seven. When the story reached its conclusion, however, Spock felt it his duty to put things right and give the Chief Engineer his due.

"Allow me to point out, Mr Scott, that had you not contrived to make use of the energy from our phasers, we would never have achieved lift-off. If I may quote Admiral Kirk, 'You worked one of your miracles.'"

Scotty grinned from ear to ear. "That's very good of you, Captain, but let me return the compliment. If you hadn't jettisoned the fuel we wouldn't have been spotted by Sulu, and we would have burned up in the atmosphere of Taurus II. How's that for a miracle, sir?"

The Captain looked affronted. "Mr Scott, need I remind you that the actions of Vulcans do not originate in magic but in logic and reasoning." As might be expected, this purely Spockian retort aroused a great deal of mirth amongst the Humans.

"Logic and reasoning?" scoffed the Doctor. "Logic, my foot! That was the most emotional decision I've ever seen, Spock, whatever you may say to the contrary."

"That's what Captain Kirk said afterwards, on the Bridge, Captain," Uhura put in softly. This ill-timed reminder, however, was lightened by her bright smile and the warm glow in her dark

eyes.

The Captain glanced round, and the sight of eager and smiling young faces all but unleashed his carefully controlled emotions. Holding himself firmly in check he cleared his throat, allowed an elegant eyebrow to soar up to his hairline, and coolly commented, "It appears, Commander, that I have nothing further to say in my defence, since my officers are now producing the evidence of such an authority as Admiral Kirk."

"I have something to say in your defence, Captain." McCoy's voice rose above the others. The room hushed at once, and the Doctor continued. "What I have to say is this: whether you acted out of pure Vulcan logic or from sheer gut reaction, I don't know for sure, and to tell the truth, I don't really care. What I do know is that your action enabled the Enterprise to spot us and beam us up just as the Galileo was falling to pieces around us; consequently both Scotty and I are here talking about it, and we are damn grateful. That's all I have to say, Your Honour!"

Under cover of the cheers and applause which broke out at the conclusion of the Doctor's speech, dark eyes and blue met and locked. The look that the two men shared apparently relayed more than words could express, for what each read in the other's eyes stirred a glimmer of a smile on the austere Vulcan face and a rueful grin on that of the Human.

When, eventually, Spock was able to take his leave of the party, Scott chose to follow suit, having solemnly promised the eager cadets more exciting tales of the Enterprise, to be related at the earliest opportunity. As the doors slid shut on the merry party, sounds of music and laughter drifted after the two officers on their way to the turbolift. Once there they parted, Mr Scott going back to Engineering, and the Captain up to the Bridge for a last check on the night watch crew.

Some time ago Spock had got back into the habit of making a nightly tour of the ship before retiring to his quarters. The route of these tours was purposely selected at random, and his crew had become accustomed to having him turn up unexpectedly in any section of the vessel. His keen ears had sometimes caught remarks and comments not meant for the Captain, which he wisely chose to ignore. He also knew that his crew referred to his nightly wanderings as, 'The Captain's on the prow!', and that some even wondered whether he slept at all.

That night, however, on his way to his quarters the Vulcan, driven by a sudden impulse, changed course and went to the Observation Deck. At this late hour the place was usually deserted, and he welcomed the peace of the darkened room, subtly enhanced by the steady hum of the ship. He walked over to the large view-port and, leaning on the rail, let his gaze plunge into the star-spangled inky blackness of space. The sight held the same fascination now as it had at the start of his career, as a lonely young lieutenant fresh from the Academy. How often had he come and found solace in the contemplation of infinity? Here, as in the depths of meditation, he found himself in total symbiosis with the universe, and the resulting feeling of Oneness generally brought peace and serenity to his troubled soul.

How often, too, had he stood there side by side with Jim Kirk,

sharing, in companionable silence, the same wonder, the same love for the stars, tokens of myriad worlds? Few words were ever spoken; they were unnecessary, since each shared the other's feeling of fullness and contentment in that unique friendship of theirs that had become legend.

Spock heaved a sigh; he was alone now, his Captain was an Admiral. The one being who had reached his hidden heart and become his friend was now parsecs away, deskbound at Starfleet Headquarters. Why, why had Jim let himself be caught in the snare of promotion? Why had he suddenly abandoned his beloved ship, his crew and space? And for what? Spock well knew that there were no answers to the questions that he kept asking himself; only Jim might tell.... and would he.... did he even know them himself? After a moment, Spock firmly pulled himself together. These regrets were pointless and un-Vulcan.

Finally, heavy-hearted, he returned to his quarters.

CHAPTER IV

At the start of the first watch the following morning Security Chief Caromandel was briefing her disgruntled troops in the trenchant, no-nonsense tone that she invariably assumed when she was upset.

"....and I don't want to hear any back talk, understand? I want the ship combed from top to bottom, and I don't care if you did do it yesterday, you're going to do it again today, and I want results. Is that clear?"

"But, Chief," one of the guards protested tentatively, "we've covered the whole place inch by inch; if we haven't found anything, it must be because there's nothing to find. The sensors haven't detected anything either, have they?"

"And nothing more's been reported missing," one of his mates added. "So why waste our time searching again?"

"Captain's orders!" the Chief snapped. The guards exchanged glances and grumbled audibly. "In fact," she went on, tersely, "the Captain is not best pleased, to say the least, with yesterday's performance. 'Most unsatisfactory', he said to me." Her fair complexion coloured noticeably at the memory of the very clear displeasure expressed by Spock when she had reported to him. To have earned the reproof - although unjustified, in her eyes - of the man she admired most was a sad blow to her self-esteem, and naturally she felt that she should pass the buck to these underlings of hers who had drawn a blank at every turn.

"Well, what are you waiting for?" she snapped, feeling their curious stares. "You have your instructions; carry them out! Dismissed!"

The men shuffled out and split into teams of two, hunting for the hypothetical and mysterious intruder who, they felt sure, existed only in the imagination of that mule of a Vulcan.

Meantime, the atmosphere in the Physics Labs was rather strained; the Science Officer was tutoring his trainees and watching

with critical eyes the delicate experiment that was being attempted by two of his favourite scapegoats. The girls were doing their best to keep cool heads and steady hands, but the mere feeling of having Schwarzenberg breathing down their necks, not to mention his grating voice, was getting on their nerves. Alison Gordon felt her team-mate - Vatanen - grow more and more distracted by the minute.

Suddenly a signal beeped at the wall communicator, and the tension was released.

"Schwarzenberg here."

"Lieutenant," Spock's inimitable voice sounded clearly in the hushed laboratory, "we are about to commence a long-range sensor drill, and I require three more trainees, if you are able to spare them?"

"Aye, sir," replied Schwarzenberg. "Will any of them do, or do you want anyone in particular?"

"I believe Cadets Kovack, Gordon and Vatanen have not worked on the Bridge as yet. Send them up, Mr Schwarzenberg; it is time to see what they can do. Spock out."

There was a pause as their instructor frowned, and the three chosen cadets held their breath.

"All right," he said finally. "You heard the Captain, he wants you on the Bridge immediately. Try to live up to his expectations. Dismissed!"

They didn't need to be told twice; two seconds later, too relieved for words, all three were scurrying along the curved corridor, eager to be out of reach should 'Schwarz' change his mind.

On the Bridge, meanwhile, all was order and calm. For the last half-hour a command team drill had been in progress, involving trainees at the various stations, and, in the command chair, Ensign O'Brien, who was doing his best to look as confident as any Starfleet veteran. It was his turn to act as Captain, and he was determined to make the most of it, especially after his dismal spell of duty in Security. None of the senior officers were present except the Captain, who had stationed himself to the rear of the upper deck. As he stood silently, hands clasped at his back, his austere features touched by an expression of mild alertness, his mere presence, his very stance, radiated an aura of quiet authority that made his cadets feel more confident and gave them the self-assurance they needed.

Spock had spoken only once, to summon the Science trainees for sensor training; otherwise he either stood still or paced placidly, watching and listening, noting the performance of his charges and filing it away in his computer-like mind.

The three trainees had not yet arrived when the comm-device on the Captain's chair beeped. The young ensign promptly replied, "Bridge! O'Brien here."

A breathless voice was heard. "I say, is the Captain with you? We've spotted the stowaway!"

O'Brien barely had time to swivel the chair before the Vulcan was at his side. "Spock here. Give your report, Crewman. What is

your location?"

"On deck eight, sir. We were checking a maintenance area when we caught sight of a man sneaking out of one of the storage bays near the laundry, but when we challenged him he just ran like a shot and escaped up a Jeffries tube. Sorry, sir; we were too far away to catch him."

"Have you advised your Chief of this, Crewman?"

"Aye, Captain. She's on the way to deck seven; that's where he was headed, sir."

"Evidently." Spock replied. "Ensure that all decks below eight are sealed, and guard all possible escape routes. Have all phasers locked on stun."

"Aye, sir." The line was switched off, and the Bridge crew hastily turned back to their consoles. The Captain eyed O'Brien with mild disapproval.

"Well, Mr O'Brien?"

"I'm sorry, sir," the young man muttered, very red in the face. "But I don't understand.... How could we have missed him? We looked everywhere...."

"Possibly, Ensign, your search was not conducted with the optimum level of thoroughness; however, we will have all the facts shortly. No, Ensign, you will stay here; you are still in command. Proceed."

But that morning's drill was not destined to reach its conclusion. Simultaneously, the Captain's intercom and the intra-ship intercom called for attention. As the Captain hit the chair switch and replied, "Spock here," Cadet Garrick, on duty at the comm station, could be heard speaking excitedly into her microphone.

"Bridge.... yes, Bridge, who is it?....Alison?.... What are you?.... What?.... Oh my God! Alison!.... Alison, come in!" and then she spun round and called, "Captain, Captain, please!" with such frantic urgency that Spock cut short the report of his very embarrassed Security Chief.

"Lieutenant, please wait; I have a priority call." He turned to Joyce Garrick, who, white-faced and wide-eyed, and obviously in shock, was staring at him. "Yes, Cadet? What is the matter?"

"Sir," she stammered, with trembling lips, "it's Alison, I mean, Cadet Gordon, sir, she was calling for help, then I heard a scream!"

In a flash, Spock was at her side. After a split second's indecision he placed a hand on her shoulder and said, "Steady, Cadet."

"Sorry, sir." She gulped back tears and then continued more calmly. "From what I heard, Captain, Alison, Vatanen and Kovack are all trapped by a man in Auxiliary Control.... and then I heard someone shout, and a scream, and the channel was cut off...."

"I see." In one stride Spock was at the science station,

swiftly running long fingers over the keys. One of the overhead screens sprang into life, displaying a detailed plan of the emergency control room. There, for all to see, shone four tiny flashing dots, one of them moving about, the other three motionless, clustered together on one side of the schematic.

"Hmmm...." The Vulcan straightened and stared intently at the screen for a few seconds, his brain working at top speed behind the frozen mask. Although his mind was tightly shielded he could still dimly feel the pressure of the crew's feelings, their fear and concern for their friends. He sternly refused to let himself be touched by the emotional influx, all the more so because he felt it mirrored in the depth of his heart. He could not afford to let his mind become cluttered with illogical emotions while the lives of his trainees, possibly even the safety of the ship, depended on maximum efficiency. He allowed his Vulcan side to take full control, and as he turned around and faced the crew they saw that their Captain had assumed his unreadable Vulcan mask. In his eyes, however, burned an intensity, a fire, so fierce that they were all somehow snapped out of their shock, and responded eagerly to his compelling gaze, ready for action.

Secretly pleased with the reaction of his cadets, Spock told them quietly, "This is the situation. Three cadets are being held captive by an unidentified intruder in Auxiliary Control. We must resolve the situation with speed and efficiency, and I am therefore relying on you all to perform your duties to the utmost of your ability. Mr Kettenring, as there is currently no need for you to man the weapons station, you are assigned to monitor Auxiliary Control until the Science Officer relieves you. It is vital that you keep a constant watch and report any change the instant it occurs."

"Aye, sir." The ensign settled himself at the science station.

"Mr O'Brien, as Acting Captain, what action do you recommend?"

"A ship-wide red alert, sir?" O'Brien offered.

"Not in the present situation. We must avoid at all costs anything which might provoke the intruder into hasty and possibly dangerous action. Miss Garrick, contact the Security Chief, then ask Commander Uhura to report to the Bridge, and inform all department heads that I will be holding a discussion in the main briefing room in ten minutes."

While delivering his orders the Captain was working with quick efficiency at the Engineering and Science consoles. As he worked he lectured the cadets, not wishing to miss any teaching opportunity. "A high priority in the event of finding an intruder on board is to prevent any sabotage; in this case, to prevent tampering with Auxiliary Control equipment. This being so, I have secured all circuits in the control room and neutralised all functions except for life-support. Miss Garrick, do you have Lieutenant Caromandel?"

"Aye, sir, she's waiting to speak to you."

Spock stepped back down to the Bridge well. "Spock here, Lieutenant.... Affirmative.... Affirmative, we have located the intruder. He is in Auxiliary Control, and has taken three cadets hostage; one of them managed to contact Cadet Garrick briefly."

"Yes, sir, I know. Has anyone been hurt?" Caromandel sounded

quite subdued.

"Unknown. I wish to know how the intruder managed to escape you, Lieutenant."

"But sir, that's just it! We tracked him down and had him cornered, then the three cadets came running down the corridor right into his arms, so he dodged behind them and took them hostage at phaser-point, then forced them along the corridor...."

"Explain, Lieutenant. How did the intruder obtain a phaser? Had he gained access to the Armoury?" The Vulcan's voice crackled like ice.

"No, sir, it's always guarded, but I found one of my men knocked out, and his phaser gone, so.... I assume...." Her voice petered out.

The trainees could not help but feel sorry for her, especially in view of the Captain's face, which was a mask of stone.

"That will be sufficient, Lieutenant. Keep your men on watch at a safe distance from Auxiliary Control. The cadets' lives are at stake, and further mishandling may endanger their safety. Now, report to the briefing room."

The Captain stood very still and considered the young and expectant faces around him. "I am now going to the main briefing room. Mr O'Brien, you have the con. Remain on this course, on impulse power. Commander Uhura will remain in contact with me; until her arrival, you are in charge."

"Aye, sir."

As Spock reached the turbo-lift the doors parted and Uhura rushed out.

"Sir!" she exclaimed, breathless and concerned. "What's going on? I've heard that some of the cadets are being held by the stowaway?"

"News has travelled fast, I see, Commander," Spock remarked drily. "You have been informed correctly." He apprised her of the situation, gave her instructions and then added, with a meaningful glance, "I am sure that you will soon be informed of the exact circumstances. Ensign O'Brien has the Con, but you are in charge."

Uhura favoured him with her warmest smile. "Don't worry, Captain, we'll be all right."

"I know, Uhura," he replied softly, and was gone.

CHAPTER V

Down on deck seven, in the very core of the ship, three bewildered cadets were warily eyeing their captor, a dark man, who in return eyed them distrustfully. The last half-hour had seemed like an endless nightmare to the youngsters, who were trying to work out what exactly had happened. Alison Gordon leaned wearily against the bulkhead and sighed. To think that just minutes earlier life had seemed so good, so exciting; she had been on her way up to the Bridge, the Captain having asked for her by name, and then, at the

turn of the corridor....crash! and the man had popped up, waving a phaser at them, then herded them into Auxiliary Control. It all seemed so unreal, so absurd, and yet.... She carefully turned her head, and stole a glance at the other two, who were sitting beside her on the deck. Vera produced a tremendous smile, and Kovack made a brave attempt at a wink. *Poor Michel*, thought Alison. *With that knock on the head he got, it's no wonder he looks so ghastly. I hope nothing's broken.* When they had been pushed into the room Kovack had attempted to create a diversion, and in his best close-combat style had pounced on the intruder, trying to buy time for one of the others to reach the nearest intercom and contact the Bridge. Unfortunately he was no match for the tough - and desperate - man; he had promptly been coshed with the butt of the phaser, and Alison herself had been dragged away from the intercom by their captor, who was furious at their resistance. He had threatened to kill them there and then if they dared make another move.

Alison risked a whisper. "Are you all right, Michel? Your head, I mean."

He winced. "It feels like it's been split open.... but otherwise...."

"Quiet!" shouted their captor, who was watching them from the upper deck, where he was leaning on the hand-rail. "I said I didn't want to hear another squeak out of you!"

"But why won't you believe us?" Vera argued desperately, throwing caution to the winds. "Why won't you listen? We're telling you the truth!"

"No!" the other snarled. "Lies.... all lies! All that hogwash about a Starship, a training cruise, it's all lies, damn you!"

The three cadets exchanged hopeless glances. Obviously this terrorist - or whatever he was - was totally desperate. His dark eyes glittered with a feverish glint, revealing his fear and determination. In his crumpled coverall, with a five-days' growth of stubble, he seemed to be at the end of his tether, and therefore very dangerous, especially while he had the phaser aimed at their heads.

And what about that cock and bull story he kept repeating, that they were on a Starliner, heading for Arcturus! If only they could make him realise the truth and get him to answer the intercom signal. Twice already the com station had come to life, the insistent beep sounding unnaturally loud in the tense silence, but he had ignored it. They had to contact the Bridge, they had to do something! Michel Kovack decided to make one more try.

"If you don't believe us, why don't you talk to our Captain? You're on the wrong ship, you know."

"Yeah? What do you take me for? He'll tell me more lies, they all do.... I know their tricks.... No way! We stay here until we reach Arcturus, and then I'm taking you with me, so if they try any tricks you'll be in the front line, see?"

"But that's crazy!" Kovack blurted out in exasperation. "We're not going to Arcturus, don't you understand? We're due back on Earth in three weeks! Of all the pig-headed...."

"Sssh! Careful!" Alison cut in, under her breath. "If he gets

excited while he's still got the phaser...."

In trepidation, they watched their captor as he restlessly paced the deck, muttering senseless words. Suddenly he halted in front of them, and began to shout.

"Why should I believe your Captain? They've all lied to me from the start.... I was granted political asylum, they said so, and then what did they do? Sentenced me to be deported back to that hell! Extradition! But I fooled them - as soon as I had the chance I gave them the slip.... and I won't trust anybody any more, no sir!...."

In the ensuing silence the three watched the man, wondering what else that they could say to persuade him, then Alison's face suddenly brightened, and she shot a warning glance at her friends.

"Listen," she said. "If there's one man on board you can trust, it's the Captain."

"And why should I believe that?" the man sneered. "Just because you say so?"

"No.... it's because the Captain is a Vulcan, and Vulcans never lie, everyone knows that." She kept her clear eyes fastened on his face, willing him to believe her.

He looked uncertainly at her, shuffled, then muttered, "Vulcan, hmm? Sure.... I know about Vulcans.. ." Then he stopped and faced them. "How do I know for sure it's a Vulcan, when I've only got your word for it?"

"If you answer the intercom signal, you'll see him on the screen," Kovack cut in, sharply. "You know what Vulcans look like, don't you?"

"Don't take that tone with me, kid!" The phaser was thrust under the boy's chin. "You behave, or I'll teach you a lesson or two, see?"

There was another frozen silence, punctuated by the wild beats of their hearts, then they each let out a breath of relief as he lowered the phaser. He spoke suddenly, making them all jump.

"You, girl.... know how to work the intercom thing?"

"I.... I think so," Alison replied.

"I know how," Vera volunteered timidly. "I can do it."

"Right, you two come here and call your Captain. And no funny business! No, you call and I'll do the talking. Now, move! And as for you, smart lad, you stay right there if you don't want your pretty face vapourised into thin air!"

The girls scrambled to their feet, sharing a hopeful glance. The situation was still far from good, but at least they would establish contact with Captain Spock, and then the problem would rest in his hands. They felt sure that he would know what to do.

The briefing room was noisy, not to say rowdy, when Spock

arrived at the door, but as soon as he stepped inside his command team fell silent and sat up somewhat sheepishly under his frosty gaze.

He sat down and calmly folded his slender hands on the table. Casting a brief glance around, he quietly declared, "I take it, gentlemen, that you are all aware of the gravity of the situation? I assume that the Security Chief" (cold glance at the red-faced Lieutenant Caromandel) "has apprised you of the circumstances leading to this regrettable state of affairs."

Doctor McCoy, obviously seething with indignation, burst out, "Adverse circumstances be damned! This appalling situation, Captain, sir, is the result of gross professional negligence and blatant inefficiency! I just can't believe it! A Starship.... more, the Enterprise!.... hijacked like a private space liner or a cargo ship! This is rich.... Y'know what, Spock? We'll be the laughing stock of the Fleet!"

"It's all very well for you to criticise, Doctor!" Caromandel's eyes flashed with resentment. "What would you have done? Risked the trainees' lives?"

"That's ridiculous! If the man had been caught right at the start, the question wouldn't have arisen."

"I don't see what concern it is...."

"Gentlemen...." The deep voice sliced through the heated argument with the smooth and deadly efficiency of a steel blade, and once he had obtained silence and attention from his restive officers, Spock resumed. "This discussion is both pointless and unproductive. While the safety of three cadets depends on our prompt action, we cannot afford to waste time with vain regrets. What is done is done, and we must take steps to remedy the situation, but first, Doctor, allow me to set your mind at rest as regards the reputation of the Enterprise. As her Captain I, of course, take full responsibility."

The Captain's quiet dignity did much to ease the tension in the room, and some people had the grace to look rather embarrassed.

"I would also point out," Spock went on, a glint in the depths of his dark eyes, "that my initial hypothesis that an intruder might be on board was met by disbelief and even derision."

A ripple of sheepish amusement ran through the room as Mr Scott declared, with a knowing air, "For sure, Captain, you're right there. We've had quite a few aboard who thought maybe you had a wee bee in your bonnet about that intruder, sir!"

"I am well aware of that fact, Mr Scott," the Vulcan retorted drily. "However, to return to the point of the discussion, we are faced with a stowaway turned kidnapper...." and Spock quickly brought them all up to date on the latest developments; he then called the Bridge.

"Have you had any success, Commander?" he asked Uhura.

"No, Captain. I've called twice, but no response; situation is unchanged so far. Shall I try again?"

"Affirmative, Commander, and please give us a tie-in to the

Control Room."

"Right away, sir."

On the wall of the briefing room the large screen came to life, and the officers watched with mixed feelings; the Control Room, the three figures in their red jumpsuits huddled together at one side, while an individual in a dark coverall was pacing the deck like a caged lion. Sulu murmured, "Poor kids.... really tough for them!"

"And the worst of it is that those two girls are my patients and need medication," the Doctor said tightly, and cast a black look in the direction of the Science Officer. "So far, they seem to be coping, but for how much longer? That man looks to me to be unbalanced and excitable. Could we get a close-up, Spock?"

Spock nodded, and Schwarzenberg, who was operating the console, brought the haggard face of the stowaway into focus. After a moment of close scrutiny, Spock looked across at McCoy.

"Your opinion, Doctor?"

McCoy was peering at the screen, pursing his lips, and, with a sigh, he shook his head. "This backs up what I thought. This guy is obviously a psychopath - you know the type, Captain - and he's cornered and frightened. It won't take much to send him round the bend, and with that phaser.... mighty dangerous if he gets out of control. So, whatever you plan on doing to set those kids free, I'd advise extreme caution."

"Point noted, Doctor. Lieutenant?" Spock cocked an eyebrow at Caromandel.

"Well, sir, as long as he has a weapon there's not much we can do. I mean, no direct assault can be considered in the present situation," she replied, with some reluctance.

"Gentlemen?" The Captain glanced interrogatively at the others. A murmur of assent followed, and Chief Engineer Scott added his point.

"I take it that you've had all control functions disconnected, first thing, Captain?"

Spock nodded. "Except for life-support and communications, of course."

"Aye, sir.... of course," Scotty mused. "So at least he can't play havoc with the ship's operations. But I've been thinking.... that control room is built to be virtually impregnable, the safest place on the ship, isn't it? Trouble is, instead of us safely inside, with the enemy outside, it's the other way round; the enemy's inside and we canna storm the place because of the cadets."

"Precisely, Mr Scott. What is more, as the room is fully shielded the transporters are ineffectual, and we are therefore unable simply to beam them out," Spock pointed out.

"Aye, sir. But there may be a way in that we've overlooked." Mr Scott assumed his craftiest look, and after a pause - for effect - he explained. "Like this, sir; through the Fire Control Room, as it's directly below. Some of us could sneak in there, quiet like, then get up the emergency ladder into Auxiliary Control, while you

others create a diversion to keep him occupied. How's that?"

Scotty's bright idea, however, met with two rebuttals.

The Vulcan merely lifted an eyebrow, saying quietly, "Too high a risk, Mr Scott," but Doctor McCoy had more to say, and more loudly.

"That's right out of the question, Scotty; it's far too dangerous for the cadets. If the guy thinks we're making the slightest move against him you can bet a year's salary that he'll retaliate on them, and I wouldn't give them much chance. It's always the same with terrorists, hijackers and the like - that's what they take innocent hostages for!"

"Aye, I know that, Leonard," Mr Scott retorted. "But we don't want to have the bairns cooped up with him for longer than we can help. We have to get them out, and the sooner the better."

"Sure, Scotty," drawled McCoy. "The point is, how?"

"What about some knock-out gas through the ventilation ducts?" Sulu suggested.

Spock shook his head. "No known anaesthetic gas has a rapid enough effect to render the subject instantly unconscious, and during a delay, however short its duration, anything might occur. Do you concur, Doctor, Mr Schwarzenberg?"

Both men agreed, and McCoy added; "Even if we synthesize a paralysing gas of some sort, it's still going to be a few seconds minimum before it would take effect. I wouldn't like to chance it. Some problem, isn't it? Dammit, Spock, why can't you think of something? You always used to come up with some ace from your sleeve in this kind of no-win situation. That's what we need now!"

The Vulcan, who had been constantly watching the screen while conducting the debate, replied quietly, "Indeed, Doctor; in any 'impossible' situation, there are always possibilities. Since we are unable to capture our intruder while he remains in Auxiliary Control, the logical course of action is to compel him to come out of his own free will."

Ignoring McCoy's sarcastic snort, Spock continued serenely, "We could not reach a solution, Doctor, while the situation remained at a deadlock. Now, however, it seems that it is about to improve.... observe." He indicated the screen. "The cadets have apparently succeeded in persuading the intruder to speak with us." And, true enough, they could all see the two girls and their captor standing at the communications station. Almost simultaneously their comm-unit bleeped, and Spock flicked the switch.

"Spock here."

"Captain!" Uhura's voice sounded elated. "He wants to speak to you, at last!"

"Patch him through, Commander."

The small screen of the comm-unit lit up, and a drawn face, eyes gleaming with suspicion, shimmered into view.

"Where is he? I don't see anything, where is the Vulcan?"

muttered a gruff voice.

Spock flicked the video-transmit key and at once the man's expression changed as he peered at the austere face, enhanced by the upswept eyebrows and elegant pointed ears which appeared on his screen.

"Oh, so that's you, the Vulcan? Captain of this ship?"

"I am the Captain," Spock replied sternly. "What is your identity? You have illegally boarded this vessel, stolen goods and supplies, and you are threatening members of my crew, whom you are keeping prisoner. What are your reasons for this course of action?"

"Now wait a minute, Captain! That's no way to talk to me! I'll have you know you're speaking to El Libertador, and no one dictates to me. As for your precious 'crew', they are my hostages, and they will come to no harm if you do what I tell you!"

For the next fifteen minutes or so the Enterprise officers listened, fascinated, to the unbelievable discussion between a fanatical, desperate hijacker and a logical, imperturbable Vulcan. As might be expected the patience and tenacity of the latter paid off, and some valuable information - extracted from the intruder and supplemented by the computer - was brought to light.

It turned out that the so-called Libertador, one Cristobal Xantar from the Arcturus system, had eight years earlier been arrested on Denebia II for attempted subversion, riot and sedition. Found to be mentally unbalanced, he had been held in a hospital and subsequently sentenced to detention and rehabilitation in the psychiatric unit of Elba II. After many years spent in custody he had made his escape during a transfer, and disappeared from view for a while. After numerous recaptures and escapes he had finally found his way to Earth, and forced an entry to one of the Federation space-docks, where by means of a stolen identity chip he had passed himself off as one of the dockyard technicians delivering cargo to the space-bound vessels. The trouble was that instead of boarding and hiding on a space-liner bound for Arcturus - as he thought - he had actually got onto the Enterprise.

"Great!" commented the Doctor. "That's all we need! An unstable fugitive making his getaway on the wrong ship!"

The Captain did not reply. He kept his attention on the intruder, pondering the best course of action to take with such an individual, and he sat immobile, dark eyes on the screen where Cristobal Xantar was still rambling on.

"....so when we get to Arcturus, in exchange for your three youngsters I want 10,000 credits, plus free passage and transport down to the planet. And no tricks, Vulcan! That's the deal - my freedom for their lives!"

A burst of indignant comments followed, calmly observed by the Vulcan. After a brief pause for thought, he switched on the audio again.

"Mr Xantar," he said quietly. "What you ask is illogical. Even were I willing to accept your terms, I would be unable to comply with them, since this ship is not a space-liner, and is not on course for Arcturus but is in fact travelling in the opposite direction. The cadets told you the true facts; you are aboard a

Starfleet training vessel."

Cristobal Xantar, however, was not to be convinced so easily.

"You bloody Vulcan!" he shouted, enraged. "Who said that you people never lie? You are trying to trick me.... well, it won't wash!"

"Listen to me, Mr Xantar," Spock's cool voice cut in on the man's ravings. "I am telling you the truth. Vulcans do not lie. However, if you require concrete proof, you have only to turn around and read the brass plaque set into the bulkhead above the command chair. Are you able to read the inscription?"

Everyone watched as the hijacker looked up and then stiffened as he deciphered the writing on the brass. McCoy asked under his breath, "What is it, Spock? What does it say?"

"It is a copy of the dedication plaque that is on the Bridge. If you remember, Doctor.... 'USS Enterprise, Starship Class, San Francisco'...." said Spock.

"Well! I never knew there was one down there too."

"There wasn't, Leonard," Scotty chuckled, "but Spock had it mounted there on our last voyage. Talk about foresight, eh?"

Meanwhile 'El Libertador', forced to accept the evidence, and beside himself with frustration, vented his rage on his interlocutor. Banging his fist on the comm-panel, he delivered a string of curses and choice epithets, the meaning of which appeared totally lost on the impassive Vulcan, who merely gazed calmly at him, a hint of disdainful disapproval on his lean face.

When the man finally ran out of steam, Spock firmly took command of the proceedings.

"Mr Xantar, if you mistakenly boarded the wrong vessel we cannot be held responsible, regrettable for you though it may be. I therefore suggest that you abandon this futile attempt at hijacking the Enterprise and release your hostages. It is clearly the only logical course of action."

"No way! Do you think I'm fool enough to just let you have my hostages back for the asking? After all, I don't care what ship this is. I demand to be taken to Arcturus, Captain, or I'll vaporise your cadets one by one. Still the same deal, see? My freedom for their lives. I give you half an hour to decide. After that, I'll shoot them all, starting with the boy.... Too damn smart for my liking, that one!"

The briefing room bristled with tension, and all eyes turned to the Vulcan. "Och, Captain," said Scotty ruefully. "Too bad it didn't work.... it was a good try, though."

"There are further possibilities, Mr Scott. We must persuade him to leave that room, and there may still be a way of achieving that end." Spock spoke to Scott under his breath, and then, controlling a disquieting spark of irritation, he resumed his dialogue with the terrorist, speaking in the same tone that he would have used for a cosy conversation.

"I must point out, Mr Xantar, that your demands are quite

unreasonable. It is not so easy to commandeer a Starship. The course of the Enterprise has been programmed into the computer, and her progress is constantly monitored by Starfleet; consequently, should we change course for any unforeseen or unauthorized reason High Command would immediately be alerted, and would take whatever action that they considered appropriate. This would mean that, long before we reached the Arcturus system, we would have a fleet of ships pursuing us, and I am sure that you are able to surmise the unfortunate consequences of such an event."

After a significant pause, he continued: "You must realise that you have forced the situation into a deadlock, Mr Xantar. A Starship such as the Enterprise is the least suitable means of escape in the galaxy; she would be far too conspicuous."

"Cut the small talk, Vulcan!" Xantar shouted, in a rage. "We go to Arcturus, damn you, or you won't see these kids alive again. I don't care what happens to your ship, you take me home! You now have fifteen minutes to decide: yes or no!"

A few seconds of unbearable tension went by, then Spock replied, "I need neither threats nor the fifteen minutes, Mr Xantar. I have made my decision; the safety of the crew is of paramount importance, and I have accordingly decided to accept your terms. You will be provided with transport to Arcturus, in exchange for the freedom of your hostages."

There was surprise, triumph and utter relief in the Auxiliary Control Room. There was total surprise in the briefing room, where some of the officers could hardly hide a certain disillusion with their Captain for having given in so easily; others, however, who knew him well, just waited for his next move. Even on the Bridge, where Uhura had been monitoring the lengthy negotiations and keeping up a running commentary for the benefit of the Bridge crew, Spock's compliance was viewed with mixed feelings.

Doctor McCoy, true to type, had no compunction in voicing his opinion with his usual sarcasm.

"Something's gone haywire with your plan, Spock. You've as good as delivered the Enterprise to a crank, and now we'll have to go traipsing off to Arcturus, with the hostages still in there with him! That pretty speech about the Fleet chasing after us is just eyewash, and it didn't work! So much for your infallible logic!"

In answer Spock regarded the Doctor, head tilted, a sardonic eyebrow raised slightly, looking for all the world like an overgrown impish elf.

"I do not recall mentioning the Enterprise, Doctor," he said, softly.

Then, as comprehension dawned on the other officers' faces, the Vulcan turned to the Chief Engineer.

"Mr Scott, I want you to have a shuttlecraft made ready; Herschel or Copernicus, at your discretion. I trust that it will not be necessary, but she will need to be fully equipped for deep space flight; also, I require a number of comm-devices to be concealed about the body of the craft, in order to establish a permanent audio contact with the Enterprise. The shuttlecraft must be ready within one hour; are you able to carry out the necessary work in that time?"

"Aye, Captain!" Scotty replied, a knowing grin creeping onto his face. "Leave it to me, it's as good as done. I knew you'd have some trick up your Vulcan sleeve!" And he bustled out with enthusiastic zeal.

McCoy, looking somewhat abashed, had no time to vent his feelings. "Spock, you wily Vulcan!" he began. "Why couldn't you...?."

The Captain cut him short. "There is no time, Doctor. I still have to complete the arrangements with Xantar." Reopening the channel, Spock resumed the discussion.

"Mr Xantar, I require your full attention. These are my terms; a shuttlecraft fitted with warp drive, and with a pilot, will be at your disposal to transport you to Arcturus, and...."

It took the best part of an hour to reach an agreement - an hour of discussion and haggling which almost taxed the legendary Vulcan patience to its limits, and kept the good Doctor on tenterhooks - but at last the details were arranged to everyone's satisfaction. Xantar finally accepted that food and drinks be delivered to the Control Room, but insisted that they were left just outside, in the security lobby. Also, on the Doctor's insistence, he agreed to accept a small medical kit containing the appropriate drugs. However, the hijacker was determined to keep the cadets as a personal safeguard for his journey to the shuttle-bay. He declared, by way of conclusion, "Whether you like it or not, Captain, they are staying with me. They will be a guarantee of non-interference and of free access to the craft. That should stop you from trying to play tricks on me!"

To that Spock, at his haughty best, retorted icily, "Vulcans do not play, Mr Xantar!", a purely Spockian response which, despite the gravity of the situation, did much to ease the tension in the briefing room.

After switching off the channel, the Captain got wearily to his feet and began to issue a flow of orders which sent one and all running to their respective assignments.

"Time is of the essence," he said briefly. "The terrorist will leave the auxiliary control room in twenty-four point three-six minutes; we must be ready at that time. Mr Killikranky, you will organise the food for the hostages, and Doctor McCoy will give you the necessary medical supplies."

"On my way, sir!"

"Lieutenant Caromandel, you will station your men on decks seven through seventeen, and in the landing bay. However, at no time will they interfere or display their weapons. Is that clear?"

"Perfectly, Captain!"

"Good. On your way.... Yes, Mr Sulu?"

"Sir, I'm volunteering to pilot the shuttle."

"Thank you, Commander, but that will not be necessary. I shall be the pilot."

"But, Captain, you can't do that!"

"Spock, are you mad? That's ridiculous!" Sulu's and McCoy's voices rose in unison.

Spock looked mildly affronted, and drew himself up to his full height.

"Why not? I would remind you that I have full clearance and licence as a shuttle pilot."

"Of course you do, Spock; that's not what we meant!" McCoy interjected. "But you are the Captain, and as such, you shouldn't...."

"As I said a short time ago, I take full responsibility for this incident. Your role, Mr Sulu, will in any case be of the utmost importance; I need you at the helm, to be responsible for the operation of the tractor beam."

A delighted grin split the pleasant face of the Chief Helmsman.

"Aye, sir, I see what you mean!"

"Exactly, Mr Sulu. If we are unable to free the hostages and overcome Xantar in the landing bay, and if I am forced to pilot him in the shuttle, you will, in all probability, be our last resort."

"I won't fail you, sir," the young man replied soberly.

"I am aware of that, Mr Sulu. Now, this is how we shall proceed...." and Spock gave him concise and clear instructions.

When at last only McCoy remained, Spock looked at him inquiringly.

"What are you waiting for, Doctor? You have to prepare the medical supplies for Mr Killikranky, do you not?" He strode to the door.

"I know, but that won't take a minute. It's just that.... Spock....er...." The Doctor looked unusually crestfallen.

"Yes, Doctor? What is it? We do not have a great deal of time." Spock paused in the doorway.

"Dammit, Spock, you really don't make things easy!" blurted McCoy. "What I'm trying to say is that I'm sorry! I know, to apologise is an emotional waste of time, but at least let me get it off my chest! I'm afraid I put my foot in it.... you know.... about surrendering the ship to a crank.... and the rest.... Well, I want you to know that I didn't mean it, and.... in fact, er, considering the situation...."

The Vulcan allowed a faint smile to flash across his face.

"Doctor, do you really think, after all the years we have known each other, that I still take your accusations, criticisms and insults at face value?"

"Spock! You green-blooded fraud!" McCoy's face crinkled into a grin. "Although I should know you, by now! Oh," he added, as the Captain turned away, "there is something else, Spock."

"Doctor, time is running short," Spock said with a touch of

impatience.

"It's the crew. Don't you think that you should tell them what's going on? The grapevine's been running wild, these past few hours, and you know there's nothing like a speech from the Captain to set everything right. It's good for the morale of the troops!"

Spock looked at him, in some discomfort. "I have no aptitude for that kind of public address, Doctor, as you are well aware."

"Well, sure! I don't expect you to have Jim's special charisma and easy-going way with the crew, but you can give them the reassurance they need in your own Vulcan way, Spock. Why don't you just try?"

With the long-suffering sigh that he reserved for his favourite opponent, Spock reluctantly agreed.

"Very well, Doctor, if you feel it to be necessary. I shall do my best...."

As he strode off along the corridor, McCoy's voice drifted after him. "Take care, Spock, and good luck!"

This time, at least, the Doctor had wished him luck.

About ten minutes later the Doctor was in Sickbay, hastily putting together a first-aid kit including stimulants, sedatives and plasti-skin, when the Vulcan's calm voice came over the intra-ship communicator.

"All hands.... this is the Captain. You will all be aware of the current critical situation aboard; this will shortly be resolved. The....person holding crewmembers to ransom will see his demands satisfied, in exchange for the release of the hostages. In order to facilitate the smooth progress of the operation, crewmembers are to stay away from decks seven through seventeen, until further notice. I am relying on you to act with discipline, and I await the outcome of the situation with confidence. Spock out."

CHAPTER VI

The Captain's speech had duly reached the hijacker and his prisoners in the auxiliary control room. The three cadets listened with bated breath, then hugged one another out of sheer joy and relief. Already their short talk with the Captain, quietly supportive, on the intercom, and with the Doctor, so concerned for their welfare, had done much to raise their spirits, sorely shaken by their long confinement and the endless haggling over their fate.

Soon they found the food and medical supplies behind the security doors, in a neat package on the deck. Their captor allowed them to make use of the medical kit, and allowed them to eat, after first checking for any concealed weapon or 'trickeries', as he put it, so they had gladly sat down to a feast of sandwiches, cookies, fruit and drinks, their first meal since.... it seemed ages! As a crowning piece, a thermo-flask of coffee had also been provided, which, when uncapped, revealed quite a surprise. Neatly folded inside the plastic cap was concealed a scrap of paper which bore the inscription, "Courage, hold on! We are with you - Killy."

"Isn't he a dear?" Alison commented softly, as she deftly crushed the message prior to slipping it under the panel that served them as dining table. A quick look at El Libertador satisfied them that this move had gone unnoticed.

The man had obviously reached the end of his tether. He was pacing back and forth, giving more than ever the picture of a caged animal. At first, when they had offered food, he had brusquely declined, evidently fearing that it could be drugged; then after a while, seeing that his prisoners were still alive and kicking, he had helped himself to some sandwiches and coffee, and had sat apart and gulped down with relish what must have been his first decent meal for days. His hostages could almost begin to feel sorry for him; for all his threatening and crazy ways he looked so forlorn, so distraught.

After eating the two girls, putting their first-aid training into practice, had cleaned and dressed Kovack's injury, which was still throbbing painfully. They had barely finished when the sudden beep of the comm unit made them start, and their Captain's face came into view.

"We are ready for you, Mr Xantar. The security locks of the room have been released, therefore you may leave. Cadets Gordon, Vatanen and Kovack will accompany you as far as the shuttlecraft, where the pilot will await you. You may be assured that there will be no interference along the route. I trust that you will keep your word, as I shall keep mine. Spock out."

So the slow march to freedom began, along the corridors, down to deck seventeen. The three trainees went ahead, very conscious of the phaser pointed at their backs; Xantar was taking no chances, and was determined to use his hostages as a shield if necessary. Their progress was monitored by intra-ship sensors and watched by the security guards posted unobtrusively along the way. Somehow the youngsters felt comforted by their presence, passive though it was.

So far, everything was going according to plan.

Meantime, in the shuttle-bay, everyone was ready and waiting. Mr Scott, having personally rechecked the special equipment involved, stepped down from the Copernicus in time to hear McCoy's expostulations to a seemingly indifferent Vulcan.

"Doctor, I am of course aware of all of those points," Spock replied, patiently. "I shall be taking all possible precautions. Do not distress yourself on my account."

"Like hell I won't! I'm worried to death, Spock! I don't know how it is that you always manage to get yourself into some scrape or other, just like Jim! Doesn't he, Scotty?"

"Aye, he does, and more often than is good for him, but remember also that he always manages to get away with it. Don't you be fretting, Leonard, it'll soon be over. Now, it's all fixed in there, Captain. What about that communicator?" Scotty asked, eyeing Spock, who was in the act of concealing a miniaturised comm-device in the breast of his black jumpsuit.

"It is in working order; I have just checked its function with Uhura. Mr Scott, should anything unanticipated occur, I leave the ship in your care. You are in charge."

"Aye, sir," the Chief Engineer remarked soberly.

At that moment, Lieutenants Caromandel and Killikranky came running up to them.

"Here they are, sir, they're in the lift. According to all reports, that man is keeping the cadets at phaser point all the time," said the Security Chief.

"He's not taking any chances," Killy grumbled. "That's going to make it tricky, Captain."

"That was to be expected, Lieutenant. Everyone is to go to their stations; I want no one here other than Security. Doctor, you and your team will stay out of sight, please."

They all made themselves scarce, apart from Caromandel who, holding herself as straight as a ramrod, said stiffly, "Request permission to stay, sir."

"Request denied, Lieutenant," Spock replied, no less stiffly.

"Please, Captain, let me stay with you. I am responsible for your safety." Her blue eyes looked entreatingly into the sombre gaze of the Vulcan, but he remained adamant.

"Negative, Lieutenant. Your presence could endanger the lives of the hostages. You will take action when they have been released and are safely out of range, and not before. I must carry out the exchange alone."

She knew better than to press the point with Spock. She swallowed hard, drew herself up - "Very good, sir." - then swung round and marched down the bay to take her post, away from the shuttle. The huge landing bay was unobtrusively manned by security guards from top to bottom, but Caromandel could not help but feel uneasy as she watched, with a heavy heart, the solitary figure waiting by the Copernicus.

God! If anything happens to him, I'll never forgive myself! Her dismal thoughts were interrupted by the sound of the turbo-lift doors sliding apart. The critical time was near.

When they stepped out of the lift the three cadets felt, at first, disoriented; they were not familiar with the lower decks. They looked around the silent landing bay, expecting a clue, a sign.

"What are we supposed to do now?" Alison whispered nervously.

"Don't know.... I don't see anyone," Kovack muttered, while Vatanen, white as a sheet, shivered uncontrollably.

"Move on, move on! Where is that ship?" rasped their captor. They were ruthlessly prodded forward along the line of sleek, silver vessels squatting like dormant beetles. Their steps sounded hollow on the dock, and they had the uncanny feeling of being watched by invisible eyes.

"That's it, over there!" Kovack exclaimed at the sight of a shuttlecraft set apart, in launch position, hatch open, ramp down, ready for departure. With a sigh of relief they saw the tall, dark figure of the pilot standing by, waiting for them, but as they approached, pushed forward by Xantar, the shuttle pilot turned out

to be their Captain, and the three stopped short and stared at him in confusion. He had come to release them, of course, but why that dark jumpsuit, and where was the pilot.... or, was he....?

Spock gave them an appraising glance and a comforting nod, then turned his attention to the hijacker, and his expression hardened perceptibly.

"Mr Xantar, this is the shuttle that you required. The ransom money is on board. If you will release the cadets, we shall leave immediately."

But El Libertador, unnerved by the Vulcan's steely glare, protested, "Hey, wait a minute! Are you the Vulcan I was talking to? The Captain? Do you mean to say you'll pilot this craft?"

"Affirmative. Do you have any objections, Mr Xantar?" Spock asked, frostily.

"Oh.... oh no!" The other snickered. "I mean.... just rather unexpected.... a Starship Captain!"

"Then the sooner we leave, the better. You may put your weapon away; I am unarmed," Spock pointed out, having seen that the phaser that Xantar was recklessly brandishing was set to kill.

"So you say, Vulcan! Let me check, first." The man was suspicious, and thrusting his phaser against Spock's chest, proceeded rapidly to frisk the Captain, but found no weapon.

"Okay so far. Now, you three, you get in there, and fast!" he snapped, waving his phaser at the youngsters, who froze and stared in disbelief from one man to the other. What did this mean?

Their Captain was outraged.

"You will release the hostages immediately, as was stipulated in our agreement. I have fulfilled your conditions; you have now to keep to your side of the arrangement."

El Libertador let out a burst of harsh, derisive laughter. "Oh yeah? And as soon as they're out of the way, you'll set your guards on me! Do you take me for a goof, Captain? No way! They stay with us all the way, as a guarantee against foul play, like this!" and in a flash he grabbed Alison and jerked her in front of him in a vicious arm lock, phaser pointed at her head. "See, Captain? Now, do as you're told, or there won't be much left of this pretty doll. Get in, I say!"

For a few seconds time stood still as Spock looked helplessly at the girl struggling in the grasp of the madman and staring at him out of large grey eyes, at once anxious and trusting. A sudden wave of blazing anger washed over him, which he mastered in a split second. There was no time for heroics; the phaser was set on kill. No emotion should cloud his mind, even at the sight of that innocent child!

He swiftly sent the girl a gentle thought-wave, calm and reassuring, then reviewed with lightning speed the few options that still remained. As he had feared, the hijacker was getting more and more desperate, and therefore more dangerous. A quick glance in the direction of the lifts revealed the Security Chief poised for action, weapon in hand, but he shook his head. Any frontal attack

would only lead to chaos and bloodshed, with the cadets being caught in the crossfire. Better to bide his time.

With a warning glance at the cadets Spock drew a deep breath and said swiftly, "Very well. Since you choose to act as a terrorist, Mr Xantar, we have no choice but to submit. However, you would be well advised to keep in mind that terrorism is a double-edged weapon."

"Seems to me that you're in no state to threaten, Vulcan!" sneered the hijacker. "No more talk! Now, up you go!" He gestured wildly at the ramp.

Spock glanced briefly at the observation balcony, high above the deck, where he could see faces looking down at him, then, placing a hand on Kovack's and Vatanen's shoulders, gently propelled them up the ramp and climbed deliberately, closely followed by Xantar, who was still keeping Gordon locked in his grasp. The watchers on the balcony saw them disappear from view and the hatch doors shut tight.

The whole scene had been watched from the observation galleries and on the Bridge screen with equal dismay. Things had taken a wrong turn. Doctor McCoy, in the control room bay, saw the shuttle come to life, lights blinking, thrusters purring, and voiced his feelings in no uncertain terms.

"Dammit, Scotty! We've got to do something! We can't just let them go like this. What are you waiting for?"

"Never fear, Doctor," the Engineer replied, with more confidence than he felt. "Even if we do have to launch them, we'll get them back." He punched a button on his comm unit. "Scott calling the Bridge.... Bridge, do you receive?"

"Sulu here. We have a problem, Scotty. Seems to me that it's up to the two of us now."

"Aye, agreed. But first, I'll activate the force field, if Spock gives us the green light.... failing that, we'll both combine forces with tractor beams and pull them back, right? Now, let's monitor that shuttle." Mr Scott flicked another switch and a muted humming filled the room.

"What's that?" asked the Doctor.

"The Copernicus. We're in constant audio contact, so whatever is said or done there we'll hear it here and on the Bridge." Scotty leaned forward, listening intently to catch any sound, any sign which might give him a clue.

Then the voice of the Captain came, loud and clear, and calm as ever. "Mr Xantar, we cannot depart as long as you keep standing there with that weapon pointed at the cadet. Please hold fast, or you may be thrown off balance at take-off, and inadvertently hurt someone."

Almost at once the rumble of the thrusters increased steadily, and the Copernicus began to move slowly, her power still leashed.

McCoy shook his head in disbelief. "Did you hear that?" he asked the room at large. "There he goes, at the point of a phaser.... and he's talking like a steward on a luxury space-liner!"

Killikranky was amused by the Doctor's comment. "Indeed, it seems that nothing can shake our Captain's cool. I wonder if he's ever blown his top in his life."

McCoy looked at him. "He has, Lieutenant, and believe me, a hurricane is tame by comparison!"

They could hear Spock again on the intercom, reasoning with the hijacker. "You know that these cadets are unarmed, and harmless. What can they do, in these circumstances? It is therefore both pointless and unnecessary to cover them with the phaser, Mr Xantar."

"I do as I please!" the man snarled. "And what are you waiting for? Take us out, damn you!"

"I am obliged to wait for clearance from the Bridge. We cannot depart while the force field remains activated," explained Spock, pointedly.

Mr Scott had his cue. After releasing a string of selected profanity, he opened a channel to the Bridge. "You there, Sulu? You heard what Spock said? That means any more delay would be very risky; we'll have to let them go. Are ye ready?"

"We heard, Scotty, and I'm as ready as I'll ever be. Do we give them clearance now?"

"Aye, right away. I'll fix the force field, then it's up to Spock to counter that guy before we pull them in, or I wouldn't give much for their chances."

"He will, Scotty, never fear!" Nothing could shake Sulu's total confidence in the Vulcan's resourcefulness.

"Amen to that!" Mr Scott muttered as he pushed the lever deactivating the field which kept the craft from leaving unauthorised; then Uhura was heard, calling from the Bridge. "Bridge to Copernicus.... You have clearance to launch...." A pause, "Godspeed, Captain!" Her voice faltered.

Back came the deep voice of the Vulcan. "Copernicus to Enterprise, acknowledged. Thank you, Uhura. Spock out."

With a heavy heart the crew watched the sleek shuttle glide along the runway toward the wide-open doors, then in a roar of thunder the thrusters spat fire and the craft soared out with powerful ease into the dark void of space.

As the huge doors slid shut, Scott activated control instruments and the view-screen displayed the rear view of the shuttle, moving steadily away. "Bridge!" he called. "Do you read them?"

"Affirmative, Scotty, we have them on screen," Uhura replied. "We're following right behind. How much longer? Sulu wants to know."

"Wait just a bit, Sulu, just a wee bit," the Engineer said tensely, his eyes fixed on the Copernicus gliding smoothly through space, silver white on the black background. Then, suddenly, "For Heaven's sake!" he cried.

Everyone stared in amazement at the incredible sight on the

screen; as if caught in the maelstrom of a magnetic storm, Copernicus was taken in a wild succession of spinning, rolling and nose-diving, in a frenzy of aerobatics that left the Enterprise crew breathless. At the same time, ominous noises reached them via the shuttle comm channel, shouts, bangs and crashes which added to the confusion.

In the shuttle bay control room tension was high, and all stared aghast, except the Scottish Engineer who, strangely enough, was grinning.

"Scott to Bridge! D'you see that, Sulu? That's it, stand by!"

"Standing by, Scotty. Quite a show he's giving us, isn't it? I've never seen anything like it!" Sulu sounded jubilant.

McCoy was bemused. "For Pete's sake, Scotty, what's happening? Will someone tell me what the heck is going on?" he demanded.

Then, over the bedlam, they heard Spock. "Gordon! Kovack! Keep down!" and the repeated and significant whine of a phaser being fired. Successive bursts of explosion and crackling followed, a voice cried, "Captain, look out!", there was a tremendous deafening crash.... then silence, a deadly silence, echoed by the fearful hush which descended on the Enterprise at the sight of the motionless craft, now hanging dead in space like a bird sticken in midflight.

"Oh my God!" A whisper from Lieutenant Caromandel, then, as they watched, a white speck appeared on the flank of Copernicus which rapidly grew into a shiny cloud, getting bigger and bigger.

At the sight Mr Scott turned pale. "Quick, Sulu! Tractor beam, now!" he snapped, and simultaneously the beams operated from the Bridge and from the control room grappled with the Copernicus and began to haul her back to the mother-ship.

And then, over the faint hissing sound on the audio, came the familiar and welcome voice of the Vulcan.

"Enterprise, request permission to come aboard.... Take us in.... rapidly!" He sounded hoarse and breathless.

"Aye, Mr Spock, as fast as we can. Hold on!" shouted Scott. "We're all ready for you."

Doctor McCoy, however, was frantic with concern. "Spock!" he called. "Spock, are you all right? And the kids? Is anyone hurt? What about that Xantar? For Heaven's sake, can you hear me?"

A weary voice answered at last. "I hear you, Doctor.... Xantar is.... for the moment.... incapacitated. We are.... functional.... barely.... are losing atmosphere.... leakage.... a phaser burn on the shield. Situation.... critical.... suggest.... prompt action.... oxygen mask, Doctor."

"We're all standing by, Spock! Just hold on one more minute!" McCoy yelled at the comm unit. "But dammit, you crazy Vulcan, what did you pull that stunt for? Of all the crazy, hare-brained notions!..."

"As the Human saying goes, McCoy.... 'nothing ventured, nothing gained'.... and.... anyhow.... it worked." Spock was still faintly

argumentative.

The Doctor stormed out, closely followed by Killy and Caromandel, who quickly called up her security detail, and they joined the shuttle bay crew down by the landing area.

A few minutes later the doors parted and Copernicus, battered but triumphant, returned to the fold. No sooner had the small craft come to a standstill than a swarm of security men, medics and engineers rushed forward. An ominous hole burnt out on the flank told of the precarious condition of the crew. A ramp was hastily pushed up against the shuttle, and the Security Chief and guards ran up to open the hatch, but it proved to be impossible; it had been warped by phaser fire, and the over-ride was apparently off-line as well. Engineers were waved over, and Doctor McCoy, fretting anxiously, bellowed, "Hurry up, do something! They may be dying in there!"

However, just as thermo-drills and pliers were brought up a muffled shout reached them from inside. "Stand back!" and a split second afterwards, with a screeching tearing of metal, one of the hatch doors flew open and slammed against the shuttle's flank, to end hanging loosely on its torn hinges. From the smoking darkness the bedraggled figures of Cadets Kovack and Vatanen emerged on shaky legs, one supporting the other, both looking white and shaken. At once willing hands caught them up and passed them on to the medics waiting at the foot of the ramp.

Medi-scanner in action, McCoy was barking orders right and left and seeing to the initial care of the youngsters, when an exclamation, "Oh, my God!" from his Chief Nurse made him spin round and stare.

Spock, attended by Security, was standing in the hatch, carrying in his arms the limp form of the third hostage. The normally neat and immaculate Vulcan presented a sorry sight, clothes rent and soiled, dark hair ruffled and green trails on face and hands. Looking down at a blanched security lieutenant, he ordered briefly, "You will find the hijacker under the console, Lieutenant. Take him to the brig, maximum security, with double force-fields and a reinforced guard."

"Aye, sir."

"He will require medical care - under strict supervision, of course. He is now your responsibility, Lieutenant."

"Understood, Captain," she replied, then went into the shuttle.

Spock, still carrying Alison Gordon, and declining any offers of assistance, came slowly down the ramp and suddenly found himself surrounded by cheering Humans and assaulted by a wave of emotion. Although the throbbing pain he felt in his shoulder rather impaired his mental control he somehow maintained his composure and carefully delivered his charge to the medical team, saying, "Take good care of her, and of the other two cadets. They have all shown great courage under adverse conditions."

"And naturally after you've had your fun and games it's up to me to pick up the pieces, and patch them up if I can!" McCoy grumbled sourly, as he applied an oxygen mask to Gordon's pale face. "All right.... take them to Intensive Care.... on the double!"



As they watched the three anti-grav stretchers being whisked away by the orderlies the Doctor remarked, "They should be all right, but I'll keep them under observation for a few days. The experience they went through is also bound to leave psychological trauma. On the whole you've been lucky, Spock. But that was a close thing - that crazy stunt of yours really takes the cake!"

Mr Scott, who had arrived in the meantime, agreed heartily. "You gave us quite a turn, Captain! For a moment I thought you wouldna make it, but my! - what a show you put on!"

"Damn fool risk to take, if you ask me," snorted the Doctor, as he waved the scanner over the Vulcan's chest.

"A calculated risk, Doctor," Spock countered. "It was the only way to throw Xantar off balance and have him relinquish his hold on the cadets. With their assistance I was able to put him out of action, although as a direct result, Mr Scott, you will find the Copernicus greatly in need of an overhaul."

"No problem, sir," Scotty replied happily. "I'll get a team working on her right away; it'll be good practice for the trainees as well. We'll have her good as new in less than a week!"

Doctor McCoy looked up with a frown and remarked dryly, "From these readings, I can see that someone else will be going for an overhaul right away. Spock, I want you in Sickbay; you require immediate medical attention, and I won't take no for an answer!"

The Vulcan drew himself up, somewhat painfully. "Unnecessary, Doctor. I am still functional, and there are a number of matters to be attended to without further delay."

"Now, Captain, don't give me that! You have a couple of cracked ribs, a broken collar bone and several head wounds, not to mention various cuts and bruises. You're hardly in a fit state to resume duty. And what happened to your hands?"

Spock gazed down at his hands, covered with blood and several cuts, and winced as he flexed his sore fingers.

"A close encounter with Mr Xantar's jaw, followed by a further incident with the shuttle hatch," he said, deadpan. His audience choked with laughter, and Killikranky inquired with interest, "How come that you didn't resort to the Vulcan neck pinch, Captain?"

"There are certain circumstances, Mr Killikranky, when Vulcan methods, for all their unequalled efficiency, prove to be.... ah.... less rewarding than the Human modus operandi," Spock replied, with dignity.

"Quite right, Mr Spock!" the Chief Engineer chuckled. "A good, sound punch.... there's nothing like it!"

McCoy, however, seeing that the Vulcan was turning quite pale, and that his legendary resilience was finally giving way, cut in sharply.

"Captain, sir! Even if you won't admit it, I can see you're all in. Now, are you coming to Sickbay with me, or do I have to have you carried?"

The Vulcan, although exhausted, was not yet prepared to

surrender. "Doctor, I shall report to Sickbay, but it is imperative that I first go to the Bridge. Starfleet Command must be contacted for instructions regarding our prisoner, the training programme must be resumed without further delay, and...."

"No way, Spock!" McCoy was adamant. "Let your senior officers take care of all that, and accept the logic of the situation. You are unfit to command in your present condition, and as Chief Medical Officer of this ship, I have the authority to...."

"I know, Doctor. I am aware of your prerogatives...." Spock said wearily. He felt his control slip away as wave after wave of acute pain swept over him. "However," he went on, doggedly, "when those prerogatives go so far as to prevent me from running the ship.... this may be.... considered.... as a blatant case.... of misused.... authority."

"Captain!" McCoy flared up. "Starfleet regulations stipulate...."

What exactly the regulations stipulated, no one was to know, for the Doctor stopped in mid-sentence; the Vulcan, overcome by pain and exhaustion, had collapsed into the arms of his officers.

Once they had gently laid him on the nearby stretcher, McCoy looked at them with a wry smile.

"That, gentlemen, was a perfect demonstration of Vulcan pig-headedness. They want us to believe that they're indestructible. Well, all I have to do now is go and patch him up. I guess you're in charge now, Mr Scott?"

"Aye, Doctor. Don't worry, we'll take care of things on the Bridge and in Engineering, and.... you take care of him."

"Sure! But my biggest problem will be to keep him in Sickbay for a few days. I'd appreciate it if he could be left alone, no matter what. I'll let you know when you can see him, okay?"

"Okay, Doctor, that's fine with me."

"Right, Scotty, let's get going. If I'm needed, I'll be in surgery."

CHAPTER VII

On the Enterprise the daily routine was running smoothly under the strict but fatherly rule of Chief Engineer Scott, who divided his time between the Bridge and the shuttle bay, where the Copernicus was being refitted.

The training classes and drills, as programmed by Spock, were duly conducted by the senior officers, and, but for the presence of a well-guarded prisoner in the maximum security cell, and that of four pampered patients in Sickbay, there was little to recall the perilous situation that the Enterprise had been in recently.

Naturally, the excitement over the aborted hijacking was far from abated, and the 'Copernicus caper', as the crew called it, was fast becoming one of those legendary yarns, to be spun and expanded on ad infinitum. For that reason the main ward of Sickbay had become a pole of attraction, so much so that Doctor McCoy had been

compelled to impose a ban on his domain, for the time being at least, and to post a bulletin on the outer door with the latest report on the condition of his famous patients.

The office doors slid open, and a young nurse walked in, carrying a tray.

"Your morning coffee, Doctor," she said brightly.

"Ah! Just what I need, thank you, my dear.... They certainly know how to train nurses at HQ now!" he commented pleasantly as he watched her pour coffee and open a tin of biscuits. "I've never been so spoiled by my staff before, and I must admit.... it's a great improvement!"

She laughed and blushed prettily, and was about to leave when he stopped her with a question. "Tell me, Nurse.... is there any change yet with the Captain?"

"No, Doctor, no change at all."

"Right.... Well, it shouldn't be long now. Tell Kendall to keep a close watch on him, will you?"

"Very good, Doctor. Ah.... sir.... as I have nothing particular to do just now, may I stay with her?"

McCoy's blue eyes twinkled over his cup. He took a sip of coffee, then drawled musingly, "Well, let me see.... if you have nothing better to do.... on reflection.... I have no objection, and anyway, two nurses are better than one. Okay, you can go and watch our Vulcan having his beauty sleep."

"Oh, thank you, Doctor," she replied demurely.

"Get along with you!" he chuckled. Then as the doors opened he pricked up his ears; some confused noise drifted in from the ward. "What's that noise I can hear in there?"

"It must be the cadets, sir. Remember, you gave them leave to receive visitors today, and it's brought quite a crowd down to Sickbay this morning."

"I may have allowed visitors, but certainly not that damn noise! Where do they think they are?" The Chief Surgeon stood up abruptly and stomped out to the ward.

Sounds of chatter and laughter reached his ears long before he got there so, assuming his grumpy mood, McCoy strode in and barked, "Now! What's going on here?"

A frozen silence descended on the room. Keeping a straight face the Doctor glanced around at the sheepish trainees and said gruffly, "I'll have you know that this is not the rec-room. You either behave yourselves in here or I cancel visits altogether."

Then, ignoring the protests, McCoy went and checked his young patients, expecting them to be fatigued with all the excitement. On the contrary; sitting in state in their beds, propped up against piles of pillows, they looked very well indeed, with bright eyes, and a rosy hue creeping up their cheeks. Doctor McCoy concealed a smile and glanced at the diagnostic panels. The readings confirmed the evidence of his eyes. Apparently the presence of their friends

was now the best cure for his three patients. Hands clasped behind his back he straightened up, cleared his throat, and declared shortly,

"Hmmm... you can consider yourselves lucky there's no harm done. You're doing fine, and I may have you released in a couple of days - on light duties, mind you, for a start."

"Oh great! Thank you, Doctor!" Kovack chirped brightly.

"Please, Doctor," asked Alison coyly, "may we still have visitors? You said that you would...."

McCoy grunted and put on a sour expression which fooled no one. The crew had long since found out that, for all his grumpiness and his biting tongue, the cantankerous Doctor was indeed as kind-hearted as they came.

"What I said, young lady, is neither here nor there. Yes, you may have visitors, but a few at a time, and they're to be quiet, mind you! I don't want to hear that kind of rumpus any more. What was it all about, anyway?"

A twittering of laughter answered him.

"Well, what's so funny?"

"They were telling us about the flight in the shuttle, Doctor," young Ferrier volunteered.

"Seems to me that was anything but comical," McCoy remarked.

"Of course, Doctor," Michel Kovack explained. "In one way it was pretty scary, with Copernicus toppling over, Xantar tumbling around, cursing, and firing right and left, and us three, flat on the deck, clutching at whatever was within reach!"

"Good God! And Spock? What was he doing?" asked McCoy.

The three cadets exchanged a glance.

"As far as I could make out in the smoke, he was at the helm," Vera Vatanen explained. "But something strange happened. We weren't really taken unaware; from the start we knew that the Captain was up to something, so we were prepared."

"You see, Doctor," Alison took up the tale, "he couldn't tell us in so many words, because of having to catch Xantar unaware, so the Captain never spoke, but somehow we heard him in our minds; he warned us that he would do something with the shuttle, and when he had her keel over, we were ready. I know it sounds weird, but it truly happened."

McCoy nodded in agreement. "I know what you mean. Telepathy comes in handy at times like that."

"Oh!" The three traded a startled glance. "That's what it was!"

Kovack crowed, "I was right! I told you that we had a mental contact with the Captain.... I knew!"

The doctor looked at him with interest. "Tell me, young man, are you one of those high-ESP people? It isn't mentioned in your

psi profile, so far as I know."

"Me? No, Doctor, I'm practically psi-null, but my sister is quite gifted, that's how I knew about it. You see, it runs in the family; each generation produces a medium or a telepath, because of an ancestor of my father, who...."

"Oh no!" his friends groaned in chorus. "Here comes Uncle Tom again, what a bore!"

McCoy's eyebrows rose in surprise. "What's wrong with Uncle Tom? And who is he, anyway?"

"A very remote relation of mine, sir," Kovack grinned self-consciously. "He lived on Earth in the Twentieth century. Don't pay any attention to them, they're just kidding."

The doctor was quite intrigued. "Kovack.... Tom Kovack.... that name seems to ring a bell.... Yes, I remember when I was studying parapsychology, there was a case of a Tom Kovack who had exceptional psychic powers, and.... Wasn't he a sportsman or something?"

"Yes, sir, he was a racing driver by vocation, and quite a celebrity in his time."

"That's it, that's the guy! I recall that he could detect and ward off evil powers. Well, well, very interesting.... So you are one of his descendants? But you didn't acquire the ESP abilities, I see. Now, the three of you had a mind contact with Spock? What was it like?"

Again the cadets exchanged bright-eyed looks and knowing smiles.

"Weird, Doctor!" grinned Kovack.

"Indescribable," murmured a visibly spellbound Vatanen.

"Just wonderful!" breathed Gordon, eyes gleaming from sheer delight.

The ecstatic reaction, not quite unexpected, of the youngsters to their first direct encounter with the Vulcan's mental powers, prompted McCoy to nip in the bud any fantasy or dream they might be tempted to indulge in.

"Yes," he commented dryly. "I dare say.... This kind of experience does seem impressive, even 'fascinating', the first time, but let me warn you not to expect it to happen again every other week. On the contrary, it's extremely unlikely. I've known Spock to use his psychic capacities only in case of absolute necessity, to save a life, for instance, or to touch a mind beyond reach by normal means, but to the best of my knowledge the Vulcan code of ethics draws a strict line on the use of telepathy, mind reading, mind projection and the like, and I don't blame them. You don't play with that kind of thing."

With a wry smile, the good Doctor observed his rapt audience react to his assertion with mixed feelings, and hoped that his calculated indiscretion would put an end to possible speculation or day-dreaming about their Vulcan Captain. At any rate, he decided, it was time to break the spell.

"And...?" he asked abruptly. "What happened next that was so funny? I'm still waiting for an explanation of your disgraceful behaviour in one of my wards!"

As he had anticipated, his remark set the room a-giggle, and the tale was resumed by a chirpy Michel Kovack.

"Well, what really gives us a kick is the absolutely fabulous way that the Captain finally neutralised that maniac! He not only set the shuttle a-rolling to unbalance Xantar and catch him off his guard, but when at last he - Xantar - dropped his phaser, the Captain flew at his throat like a tiger, and they crashed down to the floor and rolled around.... My gosh! I wish our close-combat instructors could have seen it - it was fantastic!"

"It was awful!" Vatanen put in feelingly. "That man had got hold of a piece of torn steel, and he was lashing out with it, and yelling and cursing.... Like a raging beast, he was!"

"Was the Captain much hurt, Doctor?" Gordon asked with concern.

"Enough to put him out of commission for a while," McCoy replied with a grin. "But don't worry, he'll be okay. It takes more than a few cracked ribs and a broken collarbone to disable a Vulcan!"

"But," someone asked, "why couldn't you help the Captain to corner Xantar? I mean, the three of you....?"

"We did," Kovack retorted sharply. "At least, we tried, but with everything topsy-turvy, it was no fun, I can tell you! I tried a flying tackle on Xantar's legs and got kicked off across the deck, Alison got knocked out, and as for Vera.... she was somewhere wriggling under the seats."

"Hey!" the latter protested amid laughter. "I was trying to retrieve the phaser, but it had slid away out of reach under those seats. In any case, I don't remember much of what happened next, except that my head was swimming, I could hardly breathe, and I was feeling awful!"

"So that's how you missed the climax, Vera! The best straight right I've ever seen. The Captain delivered Xantar a thundering punch; it sent him crashing against the bulkhead, and knocked him out good and proper, because the last I saw of him, he was squashed flat on the deck. And, you know," Kovack looked puzzled, "somehow I felt that that punishing blow he got from the Captain paid him back for the one he gave me in the control room."

"Well, all I can say, my boy, is that it's mighty generous of your Captain to settle your accounts for you." McCoy's caustic remark provoked another ripple of giggles. "But I know what you mean," he added. "Must have been pretty rewarding to see your kidnapper get his just desserts. Can't say I blame you for feeling that way, after all."

"I don't know," Gordon said thoughtfully. "I think we'll need some time to forget, and perhaps.... to forgive. But what are they going to do with him, Doctor?"

"Don't know, my dear. That's for Starfleet to decide. I guess that they'll take him into custody in some psychiatric hospital. We're expecting a directive from HQ, I'm told.... Yes? What is it,

Nurse?"

One of the medical trainees was standing at the door of the private ward, making frantic signs to catch McCoy's attention.

"It's the Captain, Doctor. He's getting quite restless now, and we can't wake him out of his trance!"

"Dammit, Nurse!" said McCoy, getting to his feet. "Didn't I tell you what to do when a Vulcan patient starts to come round?"

"Yes, sir, and we've done it, but.... it's no use, and he's so strong!" The girl looked flustered and helpless.

"I told you to hit him hard, not give him a pat on the cheek! Honestly, I have to look after everything here...." The rest was cut off as the door shut, and the ward was left in bemused speculation on yet another Vulcan mystery.

Meanwhile, Doctor McCoy was giving his green medical team a demonstration of the Vulcan method of resuscitation. It was high time; he had found Spock panting and tossing on his bed while four nurses and orderlies were doing their best to restrain their forceful patient. Their knowledge of Vulcan physiology had, so far, been an abstract manual knowledge, but the last few days spent at the Captain's bedside had taught them more than years of theoretical study, and quite profitably broadened their views as to alien morphology. Now they watched the Chief Surgeon strike the Vulcan's face with rousing slaps and energetic zeal; then Spock's left hand shot up and caught the Doctor's wrist in a steely grasp. Dark eyes opened, and met twinkling blue eyes.

"That will do, thank you, Doctor."

"Welcome back, Spock, and how do you feel?" McCoy inquired genially, brandishing his medi-scanner.

The Captain paused while inwardly taking stock of his physical condition. "I appear to be functional, except for this somewhat cumbersome dressing, which is impeding my movements. It is not required," he remarked, with a look at his chest and shoulder tightly encased in a large plasti-dressing.

"Now, Spock, try and be reasonable. Your self-healing has done a lot to improve your condition, and the bones are set and knitting nicely together, but that's no reason to be careless and risk a relapse, so you will keep the cast on, and carry your arm in a sling for a few days until I confirm you fit for duty."

"Doctor, I assure you that my shoulder is healed, therefore a sling would both be superfluous and hinder me in the performance of my duties." Spock, swinging his long legs off the bed, attempted to stand up. However, the doctor checked him and gently pushed him back.

"Just one moment, you stubborn Vulcan. You're not getting up until I've done a complete check on you, and if I let you out of here, it will be on light duties, and with a sling! What's wrong with that, anyway?" McCoy asked with a twinkle in his eye. "You'll cut a dashing figure in a sling, Spock! The wounded hero.... just what appeals to the girls!"

The Vulcan transfixed the doctor with a withering glare but,

not feeling well enough yet for an argument, sank back on his pillows and sighed, assuming his best long-suffering look.

"Very well, Doctor, carry on. However, I will first contact the Bridge.... and is it necessary for you to have six assistants to perform my physical examination?" he added, raising a perplexed eyebrow at the bevy of nurses hovering by the bed.

A grin answered his question. "Well, no.... not at the moment," McCoy conceded; then, addressing his staff, he ordered briskly, "All right, Nurses, make yourselves useful. Paoli, go and get a fresh uniform for the Captain. Brandt, go to my office and call the Bridge: my compliments to Mr Scott, and the Captain is allowed visitors now. As for you, young lady, run to the food dispenser and fetch the Captain some breakfast; what he needs now is a good hearty meal. That's all, get a move on!"

"Yes, Doctor!" and the girls scurried away.

Once they were alone, Spock eyed the Doctor suspiciously.

"I do believe, Doctor McCoy, that you are taking a certain pleasure in the situation," he remarked sternly.

McCoy chuckled, unabashed. "I do believe, Captain Spock, that you're right." He continued, while checking the readings on the diagnostic panel, "You know, Spock, I'm quite pleased with my trainees, and I must admit, they've had the devil's own luck for their refresher course on xenobiology; with you here, I've had a prime subject to work on. I couldn't have hoped for a better tutorial for those girls. It's what I've always said - direct learning on a live specimen.... always better than abstract lectures, don't you agree?"

Two slanted eyebrows climbed simultaneously to the Vulcan's hairline. "Do I understand you to mean, McCoy, that I have been employed for the edification of your trainees?"

"Sure! Why not? I couldn't miss the chance to acquaint them with your exceptional physiology, now could I? After all, it's for the sake of Science, Spock. Logically, you shouldn't object to being used as.... say, a first rate guinea-pig, if it serves to improve the standard of their medical attainments." A devilish glint lurked in the Doctor's eyes.

This was too much for the outraged Vulcan. That the most irrational being of his acquaintance should dare make such shameless use of logic to justify his objectionable actions was unacceptable, to say the least.... and Spock said so, in no uncertain terms.

However, the arrival of the breakfast tray, and of the Captain's uniform, carefully pressed and folded, prevented any more argument, and Mr Scott coming bustling in, his beaming face alight with a grin, did much to clear the air.

Spock settled down to a hearty breakfast, while giving his full attention to the Chief Engineer as he made his report on the status of ship and crew. McCoy, as was to be expected, interposed various remarks, and between the two of them the Captain got a fair account of the situation. In the words of Mr Scott, everything was back to normal, and under control, as it should be! The drills were proceeding on schedule, the repairs on Copernicus were progressing nicely. "The damage was not as bad as I feared," commented Scotty.

"The hostages have recovered faster than anticipated," McCoy said. "We can thank the recuperative powers of youth for that. Amazing resilience in those youngsters, no sign of any 'hostage syndrome'; you'd think, to hear them talking about your exploits in the shuttle, that the whole thing was a prank, something exciting that has fast turned into a tale to be recounted for years to come! As for the hijacker, he's all right; he's being kept under mild sedation.... and the close watch of Security."

"There's no fear of Caromandel letting him out of her sight!" Scott put in. "And Security look rather crestfallen at the moment, with the leg-pulling they got from the crew!"

The Vulcan received the news with his usual composure, enhanced by the slight rise of a wry brow. Having disposed of a large bowl of stewed fruit, followed by a larger bowl of porridge, he was now sipping his tea with the contented air of a well-fed cat.

"Has Starfleet notified us of what we are to do with our prisoner?" he asked presently.

"Aye, sir," Mr Scott readily replied. "They've requested Starbase 6 to send us a patrol scoutship, and we are to rendezvous with them in about thirty-six hours from now, and deliver that trouble-maker into their care - and good riddance, if you ask me! I hope they won't let him escape from wherever it is they lock him up."

"Indeed, Mr Scott," the Captain agreed. "But Mr Xantar would seem to be mentally ill rather than merely a criminal, as you had surmised from the start, Doctor. I believe that an appropriate course of intensive therapy should be recommended in his case. Your opinion, Doctor?"

"Sure," the Doctor nodded. "But the question is.... where, and how? Seems to me that whatever's been done so far has proved to be pretty ineffective."

"Agreed.... I wonder whether an alternative method might be preferable," Spock mused. "Possibly the rehabilitation cures practised by Vulcan mental healers."

McCoy looked interested. "That's an idea.... Yes, why not? Since traditional Terran therapy has obviously failed, why not try other mental treatments? I could make a recommendation to that effect in my report."

"Yes; do that, Doctor. I shall also mention it to Starfleet, and contact my father about possible arrangements with the Vulcan Healing Commission."

"Which reminds me!" Scotty interjected. "Starfleet Command wants you to call them as soon as you're back on duty, Mr Spock. There seems to be quite a commotion up there over the Xantar case."

"That is only to be expected," Spock commented quietly.

"Aye, but from what I gathered, the brass wanted to keep it hush-hush; doesn't look too good for Fleet that a runaway gets through security controls as far as a spacedock, but someone must have blown the gaff, because it's got into the news now - it's a big scoop. I'm thinking some people will have the devil to pay."

"I should damn well think so!" McCoy said feelingly. "Because what we've been through so far is not exactly my idea of a quiet training cruise. 'It's just what you need, Bones,' Jim said to me. 'You'll see, it'll be very relaxing. Just a milk run,' he said!"

Mr Scott chuckled as Spock remarked mildly, "Jim was right, Doctor. This part of the galaxy is usually very quiet; however, you must admit that the hijacking of a Starship is not a routine occurrence. Now, with your permission, I must call Starfleet, then relieve Mr Scott of command. Any objections, Doctor?" The Vulcan cocked an eyebrow.

"Oh, all right," McCoy grumbled. "But on light duties, Spock, and with a sling. Agreed?"

"Agreed, Doctor. Might I trouble you with the tray.... and to assist me in dressing?"

Scotty, taking his leave, said in jest from the doorway, "Doctor, I'll bet that the next two weeks will be so quiet that you'll be bored stiff with ship's routine; won't he, Spock?"

"I expect that to be the case, Mr Scott; indeed, I hope that it is."

"Amen to that, Spock," said McCoy, as he helped him into his jersey and tunic, and settled the sling in place.

Little did they imagine that at that very moment an unforeseen factor was in action in the innards of the Enterprise; a factor which was to disrupt the smooth running of the ship, cause great anxiety to the command officers and great discomfort to the crew.

CHAPTER VIII

The first inkling of impending trouble was imparted to Alison Gordon by her room-mate, who had dashed to Sickbay as soon as Doctor McCoy had given the green light.

Relieved as she was to see her friend safe and sound, Joyce Garrick could not hide the fact that she was, for a certain reason, very uneasy. Once the jolly party of visitors had left, firmly shooed away by the Head Nurse, Alison looked inquiringly at her friend.

"Joyce, is anything wrong? What's the matter?" she said under her breath.

After giving a look round to make sure that none of the medical staff were within earshot, Joyce said tightly, "You bet there's something wrong! Cherie-Belle has gone!"

"Gone? When? How?"

"No idea. All I know is that when I came back after shift last night, she was nowhere to be seen. I called, I looked everywhere.... nothing. I got the others from next door to help, we searched every room on the deck, no use. I've spent all my free time since then looking for her. Of course, mum's the word! Imagine the scandal if the officers heard about it! And if you two let on, I'll ring your necks!" Joyce hissed to the other two cadets, who were listening with wide-eyed curiosity.

"Hey, what do you take us for?" Kovack protested. "We can hold our tongues, can't we, Vera? Anyway, who let the cat out of the bag?" Giggles.

"Very funny!" Cadet Garrick was not amused.

"Sorry, Joyce, couldn't help it! But how could she escape? Did you look in the air ducts and the shafts and vents on our deck? Still nothing? Funny.... she couldn't open the door, could she?"

"Of course not, I locked the door, same as usual."

"But," Alison suggested, "what if someone came in, someone from Maintenance, say, to check something in our quarters? They get in with the over-ride, leave the door open, just for a moment.... and Cherie-Belle sneaks out.... with nobody any the wiser."

"Yes.... possibly.... and now she's gone, poor darling, and I'm worried sick. How shall I ever find her?" Joyce sounded dispirited.

"Don't worry. Cats are tough. When she gets hungry she'll come back," Kovack opined philosophically.

"Oh, Michel, how can you be so mean!" Vera chided. "That poor animal must be so scared, lost somewhere on the ship. You know what, Joyce? I think you should tell the Captain."

"Tell Spock? Are you out of your mind?"

"Vera's right," Alison put in. "You should go and tell him the whole thing, right from the start. There's nothing to fear, he won't eat you!"

"He can't," Kovack giggled. "Vulcans are vegetarians!"

The three girls rolled their eyes.

"Michel Kovack, will you please stop it! It isn't funny!"

"Now, where was I?" Alison resumed. "Ah, yes.... believe me, Joyce, Spock isn't as formidable as he looks...."

"Except in a free fight!" cut in the irrepressible Kovack.

"Well, yes, of course. But what I mean, Joyce, is that you can talk to him, he takes time to listen.... he understands.... you can ask Vera and Michel, or anyone from his classes, they'll tell you.... he's very special."

"Sure he is!" chorused the other two, but Joyce was still wavering, being still, unlike her friend, rather overawed by the Vulcan.

"Now, what is all this?" The Head Nurse was standing, arms akimbo, in the doorway. "What are you doing here? Didn't you hear me say that visiting time was over?"

Garrick jumped to her feet.

"Sorry, ma'am, I was just going to leave." She looked at her friends. "'Bye for now, take care of yourselves, and I.... I'll keep you informed." She beat a hasty retreat under the reproving

glare of the nurse.

Meantime the aforementioned Cherie-Belle, invisible to prying eyes, was having the time of her life. All her senses on the alert, the cat was stealthily prowling along some dark, mysterious passages, and indulging with delight in the favourite occupation of her species: exploring. Forgotten were the long and tedious hours being cooped up in the cabin, waiting for her playmate/foodprovider/companion. Now she was free at last, free to wander and watch, and her curiosity, aroused by all kinds of fascinating sounds, odours and elusive sensations, only dimly perceived in her seclusion, could at last be satisfied. So, golden eyes gleaming, ears quivering, whiskers vibrating, she moved with cautious anticipation, soft-footed on velvety paws. Now and then, eerie noises were humming, rumbling or ticking in the dark ducts, making her bristle up and flatten her pointy ears; then, after a shivering pause, she bravely went on her way, squeezing through narrow conduits, jumping down shafts, and silently watching through the occasional grids the activities of the Humans in the world beyond. Lights were fascinating; dazzling lights which flared from mysterious devices and flashed unexpected sparkles that tickled her whiskers. She soon learned that it was wiser to observe these crackling phenomena from a safe distance, and besides, she had enough fun in sharpening her claws and teeth on the things, whatever they were, so conveniently placed at her disposal along the way. If in the process, however, these devices were left disrupted or disconnected, she couldn't care less. On the contrary, the bright objects dangling in front of her nose teased her playful disposition, and she had a great time with them, hitting them with a deft paw.

Cherie-Belle had turned the sophisticated machinery of a Starship into a cat's playground, and being just an innocent kitten, she could not realise the gravity of the havoc she left in her wake. It was left to the two-legged creatures of the ship to do so, and eventually to set right the damage she had so blissfully made.

When Uhura awoke that morning she had the curious impression that something was wrong. She opened an eye and checked the luminous chronometer set into the bulkhead by her bunk.

5.40, ship's time! That's too early! Funny, she usually awoke punctually at 6.30, which gave her time to get ready and have breakfast before the first watch. She shivered uncontrollably, suddenly realising that her cabin was unusually cold.

She sat up, and the lights came on. Something was certainly amiss, for although the thermostat was set at its normal comfortable level she could feel the chill on her bare shoulders, and saw with surprise her breath coming out as thin mist.

Oh, bother! she thought, nestling back under the blankets. *Let Maintenance do their job. I'll get up at the last minute and take a hot shower. The problem should be fixed by that time.*

However when Uhura entered her bathroom and turned on the taps, all she got was a trickle of cold water. With a curse she hastily turned them off, wrapped herself in a bathrobe, and went and called Maintenance to complain to the person in charge.

"I know, Commander," replied the harassed officer. "I'm sorry, but there's nothing we can do at the moment. The whole heating system is down, and we're working to trace the malfunction. Actually, we've been on it since the middle of the night, when the Captain called us. You'd think he never goes to bed!"

Uhura could not help but sympathise with her colleague. There was nothing worse than having people nagging at you when you were trying to solve a problem.

"Okay, never mind. I'll use the sonics. Thanks.... and good luck!"

"We'll certainly need it!" he muttered, and the screen went blank.

When, some time later, Uhura entered the messroom, warmly wrapped in a large, flowered shawl over her uniform, she smiled at the sight of her fellow officers, diversely attired in warm garments which proved both their resourcefulness and a certain disregard for regulations. Her elegance was greeted with friendly wolf-whistles and jests as she went straight to one of the food dispensers.

Lieutenant-Commander Farrell, complete with woollen cap, muffler and gloves, was trying to obtain something hot from the machine.

"Oh no!" Uhura wailed. "Don't tell me that we can't have hot coffee either!"

"Looks like it," Farrell replied, peering doubtfully at the cup just delivered on a tray. He took a sip, and made a face. "Unless you care for cafe frappe, Uhura, you'd better wait for Sulu."

"Sulu? Why, has he got an electric kettle or something?"

"No, but he went to get a phaser so we could heat the food up."

Killikranky stopped by, holding a loaded tray.

"Today's menu," he announced. "Frosted orange juice, bacon and eggs on the rocks, untoasted toast and a pot of strong iced tea. Want to try?"

"No thank you, Killy," Uhura laughed. "I'm not particularly choosy, but I'd much prefer something hot. I'm so cold. I wish they'd make it fast with the repairs. What's happened, do you know?"

"That's exactly what I want to know!" grumbled the Doctor's voice behind them. "How come our skilled technicians have allowed this kind of breakdown to happen, or is it just another of Spock's damn-fooled ideas for a surprise drill? At this rate I'll have the crew laid up with pneumonia or 'flu before long. And now, did somebody say that contraption can't even deliver a hot drink?"

"Come on, Doctor," they teased. "Take it easy, you'll get your coffee, and your breakfast...."

As if on cue Commander Sulu, sporting a bright red thermo-lined parka, burst in and announced to the room at large, "If anyone's interested, the kettle's on the boil!"

Cheers and applause sprang up as he set to work, and in the wink of an eye McCoy was handed a large cup of coffee with a flourish.

"Well, I'll be jammed!" The Doctor took a cautious sip and grinned. "Does you good inside, doesn't it?" Then, calling the helmsman, who was generously boiling up drinks for his shipmates, "I say, Sulu, do you do that on kill or stun?"

"On simmer, Doctor," Sulu laughed. "Otherwise there wouldn't even be the cup left!"

"That's what I thought. Tell me, do you think you could stun a steak for me, with french fries?" McCoy inquired in jest.

"Why not? We can but try...." said the ever-obliging Sulu. "How do you like it, rare or well-done?"

Amid all the fun and excitement Spock arrived, a distinguished figure wrapped in an ankle-length Vulcan cloak, who paused at the door and gazed in bemusement at his officers behaving like children in a kindergarten. He quickly recovered, however, and after a soft clearing of his throat moved with measured steps to the nearest food dispenser.

"Can I help you, Captain?" asked a cheerful voice at his elbow, and Ensign Kettenring looked pointedly at his sling.

"It would be most gratifying if you would, Ensign," Spock replied with his customary dignity, although he hated being dependent on others for such trivial matters.

As Kettenring set the tray on the table the Vulcan nodded his thanks, and no sooner had he sat cautiously down, mindful of his sore ribs, than McCoy, who was tucking into his own meal, plied him with questions.

"Negative, Doctor," he replied coolly, sipping his juice. "This is most definitely not a drill. All that I can tell you at the moment is that parts of our support systems have failed, for reasons unknown, and that Mr Scott is currently engaged in tracing the malfunction to its source, prior to putting the systems back into operation."

"Well, I hope they fix it fast, or we'll all freeze to death," McCoy grumbled.

"So do I, Doctor, so do I," Spock agreed with conviction. His Vulcan physiology was unable to tolerate such temperatures for long at a time, and he was beginning to feel quite uncomfortable.

"Excuse me, sirs." Sulu was standing by their table. "Would you care for a nice hot cup of tea?"

"Certainly, Mr Sulu, if it is at all possible."

"There are always possibilities, Captain." And Sulu, grinning like the Genie of the Lamp, produced a pot of hot tea, which he proudly set in front of Spock before sitting down next to McCoy.

Steaming cup in hand, the Vulcan commented mildly, "It is gratifying to see our weapons put to pacific use on occasion. Thank you, Mr Sulu."

"Quite resourceful, isn't he?" the Doctor remarked with his mouth full. "And I recommend him as a chef, this steak is done just to my taste.... Joking apart, though, what on earth could have caused this sudden breakdown? Any ideas, Spock? And is there a risk that the problem might spread to any of the more vital of the ship's functions?"

"Pending Mr Scott's report I cannot yet give you a definite answer. To surmise the possible causes and consequences of this failure would be pointless without further data, Doctor."

"Come on, Spock, can't you make a guess?" Blue eyes twinkled wickedly at the Vulcan.

"That would be most illogical, Doctor." The Captain favoured his Chief Surgeon with a frosty gaze, which of course made their fellow officers dissolve into laughter. This interchange, so true to type, sounded to their ears like some well-rehearsed play enacted by two practised actors, just for the fun of it.

The arrival of the Chief Engineer created a diversion.

"Ah, there you are, Captain!" Scott plumped himself down into a vacant chair and scratched the back of his head, looking nonplussed.

"Well, as far as I can see.... why, thank you, lassie, just what I need!" and he took a sip from the cup handed to him by Uhura. "Aye, so far as I can see," he resumed, "you're right, Mr Spock, it's NOT a computer failure. It looks more like some hitch along the lines, so we're checking all the circuitry now, but it'll take some time. Seems strange, though, that the emergency over-ride failed too. I wonder why...." The two men exchanged a significant glance.

"Do you think that the damage might be deliberate, Mr Scott?"

"Deliberate.... ah.... sabotage, you mean?" Scotty looked perplexed. "Well.... I wonder.... could be.... but who, and why?"

"Oh no!" groaned the Doctor. "Don't tell me that we've got a saboteur on board now! We've not even got rid of the hijacker yet! What is happening to your training mission, Spock? It looks like it's been doomed from the start!"

"Doctor, I would appreciate it if you would refrain from indulging in your emotional flights of fancy. As for there being a saboteur on board, the truth of that speculation remains to be seen, and we...."

The intercom signal cut him short, and a voice was heard "Engineering to Mr Scott.... Mr Scott, please...."

The Engineer jumped to his feet and the room fell silent in expectation.

"Scott here. Found something, Pat?"

"Aye, sir, in the circuitry on deck 8. Some of the couplings have been tampered with, a casing is hanging loose, and some lines have been half torn, half cut through.... but I can't see how, sir."

Scott glanced inquiringly at the Vulcan now standing beside

him.

"Hold on a minute, Pat... seem to me that we thought right, Captain. It looks like sabotage, doesn't it?"

"Indeed it does. Mr Scott, but there is something odd here..." Spock mused.

"Yes, isn't there?" Sulu remarked. "For instance, why should anyone go to all that trouble to disorganise the support systems that way, when it would be much easier and more drastic done through the computer? It doesn't make sense!"

"A good point, Mr Sulu," Spock noted. "Why should they, indeed? There is clearly some reason which we must discover. Mr Scott, instruct your assistant to stand by until we arrive. Mr Sulu, I shall be detained in Engineering for a while; you have the con in the meantime. Mr Killikranky, make sure that the Quartermaster has issued the crew with sufficient warm clothing, and check the environmental equipment. Also, check with the Doctor as to whether Sickbay requires further supplies."

His response was a chorus of, "Aye, sir," to which McCoy added his footnote.

"Thanks, Spock, but we're okay. We've got enough bedding and blankets for the time being; that is, if it doesn't get any colder!"

"It should not do so, McCoy," Mr Scott assured him. "We're starting on the repairs straight away, and normally, in a couple of hours...."

"Oh? Okay, fine!" said the Doctor. "Anyway, if the worst comes to the worst, you'll know that Sickbay is standing by, ready to cope with 'flu, frostbite, pneumonia.... and the rest. Which reminds me... Spock! Will you drop by sometime today? I want to do your body-scan."

The Vulcan looked back from the doorway. "I will not have sufficient time, Doctor, unless you propose to remove this cast. How much longer am I obliged to put up with it?"

"That's just why I want to scan you, Captain, sir! I can't take it off without checking first," the Doctor explained tersely; then as a sudden thought crossed his mind his blue eyes lit up with mischievous glee.

"By the way, Spock," he drawled. "I forgot to ask you.... how did you manage this morning? Did the nurse I sent to help you dress perform her task to your satisfaction?"

The Vulcan, his cheeks touched by a faint green flush, assumed an air of prim innocence. "I could not say, Doctor. As I did not require her services, I dismissed the young lady, and, since you ask, I can manage perfectly well by myself, thank you. It will therefore be unnecessary to send any of your assistants in future. Shall we go, Mr Scott?" And the Captain stalked out, closely followed by a grinning Engineer.

"Spock! You can't do that!" McCoy protested loudly. "The poor girls will be sick with disappointment... Damn! He's gone.... and he's managed to have the last word again!"

"You must admit, Doctor, that Spock's had enough practice with you to become an expert at repartee," Sulu observed with a laugh. "Coming, Uhura, Farrell? Time to go."

McCoy shook his head with a grin. "Well.... fact is that I've taught our Vulcan a thing or two - haven't I, my dear?" He winked at Uhura.

"You certainly have, dear Doctor," she smiled back. "And let me tell you that it's a joy to have the two of you bantering along, like in the old days. See you later!"

By that time all the first shift officers had gone on duty, so McCoy dropped his tray through the disposal slot and, whistling under his breath, made his way to Sickbay.

CHAPTER IX

By the end of the day, unfortunately, the situation was practically unchanged, and Mr Scott truly baffled. It seemed that someone was at work to test the patience of the Chief Engineer and his department. No sooner had they got some units back on line than other parts of the intricate circuitry were breaking down, as though some mysterious, mischievous gremlins were doing their best to make the Enterprise crew run round in circles, including the Captain, whose proverbial Vulcan patience was beginning to wear thin, the more so because the removal of his cast and sling had been illogically postponed by an adamant Doctor McCoy.

After a black-out of all lights right in the middle of Spock's astrophysics class, a temporary failure of one of the turbolifts - which kept an irate Doctor trapped for half an hour, a mix-up in intra-ship communications - which caused considerable imbroglgio and sorely taxed Commander Uhura's temper - and finally a sudden blare of the red alert sirens for no reason at all, the Enterprise personnel, from Captain to the last midshipman, felt that they had had about enough for the day.

On the Bridge reports were steadily coming in from the various sections, and from time to time Mr Scott or one of his assistants would call up to report the progress of the overhaul teams. Security patrols were carrying out a survey of the ship and full sensor sweeps, but to no avail. The elusive 'saboteur' remained undetected.

Meantime the Captain was sitting in the command chair, a quiet figure wrapped in a dark cloak and unflappable sangfroid, receiving reports and giving orders with equal composure. In view of the disturbing situation, and of the inherent emotional instability of Humans, Spock evaluated the fairly controlled reactions of the crew and trainees as quite satisfactory, and commendable. His orders to search the entire ship all over again had not raised the least muttering in the ranks. Obviously, the reprimand that the Security Department had received following their previous failure had borne fruit.

Such were the Vulcan's private thoughts in the midst of the Bridge activity when gradually, dimly, he became aware of a pressing sense of fear and loneliness within his mind. It was a faint, elusive impression, fluttering in and out, but distinctly conveying a feeling of distress. Closing his eyes, Spock concentrated his mental abilities to bring these strange perceptions into focus. At

any rate, he could determine that the source of the waves of distress was not out in space, but well within the ship. But where? And how had they touched his mind in spite of the unbreachable mental shields which he kept raised when in the presence of emotional beings? Although dimly felt, the cry for help expressed fear, pain and urgency.

Spock was engaged in channelling his brainwaves to reach the mysterious being when a voice in his ear, and a light touch on his arm, drew him out of his concentration, and at once the subliminal contact was gone. Reluctantly he opened his eyes, and found himself gazing into the brown eyes of Uhura, who was standing beside him, a look of concern on her face.

When, a moment earlier, Spock had failed to answer her query, she had looked round from her console and had been shocked at the sight of the Vulcan, eyes tightly shut in an ashen face, as if frozen in a painful trance.

"Captain," she asked gently, "are you all right?"

Spock exhaled in a long sigh and straightened in his chair. A glance around made him realise that he was now the focus of Bridge attention.

"Yes, Uhura. I am.... well.... Please, carry on."

At once, the crew resumed their tasks, while exchanging puzzled glances. *What had come over the Captain, all of a sudden?*

Spock, feeling that some explanation was called for, held Uhura back and quietly told her,

"What happened just now could well be significant, Commander. I was locked in a brief mental contact with a strange life-form.... a life-form definitely on board this ship, and in need of help."

This revelation stirred the curiosity and amazement of the Bridge crew.

"Do you mean.... there's an alien.... somewhere here?" Uhura exclaimed.

"All that I know thus far is that it is neither Human nor Vulcan," Spock pointed out.

"But that's impossible, Captain!" protested Schwarzenberg from the science station. "Scanners haven't detected anything; they've not raised the 'intruder' alarm, sir."

"Lieutenant, the more space travel you do, the more you will come to realise that the concept of impossibility cannot be viable there," Spock stated calmly. "I suggest that you check the sensors. Commander Uhura, please notify Security of the definite presence of an unidentified being."

He flicked the intercom switch.

"Bridge to Mr Scott.... Mr Scott, report, please."

Almost immediately the voice of the hard-working Engineer came through.

"Scott here, Captain. Repairs are completed on deck seven, and well under way on eight, and the heating system should be operational any time now. And if you ask me, Mr Spock, considering the peculiar nature of the damage, I'm under the impression that it's being done at random, the work of an amateur.... say, a practical joker, rather than an expert, if you see what I mean?"

"Perfectly, Mr Scott, and that is the purpose of my call...."

"And what beats me, sir," - once started, there was no stopping Scott - "none of the access panels have been tampered with, there's nothing broken on the outside of the hatches. There's no way to tell how our joker got access to the ducts. But one thing I know for sure, Captain," Mr Scott stated ominously, "once I catch the blighter, I'll kick him out the nearest airlock, I will! - With your permission, Captain! - That'll teach him to play havoc with my equipment!"

This dark threat was met with hardly suppressed giggles and Sulu's interested comment, "In his underwear, I presume?!"

The Captain, one quizzical eyebrow on the climb, patiently replied, "Request noted, Mr Scott. However, I believe that we now have an answer...." and in a few words, Spock described his recent experience to the baffled Scot.

"Well, if that doesn't take the cake! Could you pinpoint its location, at least?"

"Negative, Mr Scott. However, I shall endeavour to do so now. In the meantime, proceed with extreme caution; Security will assist you."

"Aye, sir," Mr Scott sounded doubtful. "We'll be careful, but.... Yes, Pat, what's up?" Some indistinct conversation followed, then Scotty's voice, sounding excited.

"You there, Captain? One of my lads here tells me that he's heard funny things near the air ducts on decks eight and nine. Muffled sounds like yowling or groaning; he says it's hard to tell, what with the resonance. I'll go and investigate right away, sir."

"Agreed, Mr Scott. Please let me know as soon as you find anything."

As was to be expected, the interchange had been followed with rapt attention by the Bridge crew, who at once embarked on such an overflow of comments and speculation that the harassed Vulcan had to request some peace and quiet in order to concentrate on his attempt to establish a mind to mind contact with the unknown being hidden somewhere on the ship. Finally silence settled onto the Bridge, and Spock withdrew into deep concentration.

One cadet, however, was unable to attend properly to her work. Sitting by Commander Uhura at the Comm station, Joyce Garrick was surreptitiously watching the tense and silent figure of the Captain. For the last fifteen minutes she had listened in bewilderment to her senior officers, and the latest developments had come as a revelation, casting any remaining doubts aside.

From the moment that things had started to go awry she had wondered, with many misgivings, whether her cat, still nowhere to be seen, might not be at the bottom of all these problems. She had

revealed her suspicions to her friends on another visit to Sickbay, and, considering the ticklish situation - to say the least - awaiting Joyce and her cat after all the breakdowns, the cadets had thought it best, rightly or wrongly, not to breathe a word to anyone, not even to Captain Spock, and to try and rescue the animal themselves before the search teams could lay hands on her.

Unfortunately their secret search had drawn a blank, and now, she was sure, it would only be a matter of minutes before her poor darling, lost, panicky and mewling for help, was caught, and.... oh, Lord!... what would they do? Toss her out of an airlock into the dark void, as Mr Scott had threatened? Or was that just a standard joke? And there was nothing she could do.... she couldn't leave her station.... or could she? Joyce cast a desperate glance at the Captain.

How on earth, she wondered, had his consciousness sensed Cherie's distress? Telepathy was all very well, but it was hard to imagine Spock detecting the brainwaves of one small cat amidst hundreds of people, machinery, electronics and the like. It was weird! Maybe at that very moment he was joining minds with her, incredible though it seemed. Anyway, one thing was certain: the Captain must be aware of her guilty secret. There was no way to try and hide her cat.... And the girl, at her wit's end, heaved a desperate sigh.

"Joyce? Is something wrong?" Uhura's voice brought her back to the present with a jolt.

"Ah.... sorry, ma'am," she mumbled, taken off guard.

"You're as white as a sheet, Joyce," the Commander was saying kindly. "If you want to leave the Bridge, it's all right; I'll call your relief, shall I?"

"Oh.... yes, please.... if I may.... I'm not feeling well." Gratefully she got to her feet.

"Well, off you go - and you'd better go and see Doctor McCoy, Joyce."

"Yes, ma'am. Thank you."

However just as she reached the turbolift, only too glad to escape, Joyce stiffened; Spock was coming out of his telepathic trance and calling the Chief Engineer.

"Bridge to Mr Scott."

"Scott here. We've found nothing so far, Captain."

"Indeed? Well, Mr Scott, I suggest that you investigate the service ducts on deck eight, on the starboard side, corridor B.... I believe that you have a reasonable chance of success in that area."

Cadet Garrick had heard enough. The lift doors had hardly slid open when she bolted inside and gave the order, "Deck eight." As the lift gathered speed she leant against the wall, exhausted and sick with worry.

At last the car sighed to a halt, and the doors had barely parted before Joyce was in the corridor. After a split second of hesitation to get her bearings she dashed along the curved corridor,

heading to starboard. When she arrived, out of breath, at the next intersection, she skidded to a halt, her heart apparently at a standstill.

Just beyond the turn she could hear male voices raised in surprise, anger, and even reluctant laughter.

"Is that what's caused all this mess, Mr Scott? Well I never! What is it, anyway?"

"Hard to say from down here, laddie. Looks like some kind of furry beastie. Too big for a tribble, though.... Let's have a closer look."

Joyce took a cautious step nearer and peeped round the corner. Her heart sank at the number of people assembled there, all peering up at an overhead panel which gaped wide open, folding ladder fixed to the side. She was too late....

Meanwhile her wretched cat was crouching in the dark, trembling with fear and hunger. The wonderful adventure had turned into a nightmare; for an eternity she had been trapped in a narrow tunnel, too scared to move because of the ominous monster ahead of her, which growled and clattered and spat fiery sparks of light. Nor was she able to crawl back because of the hard, unyielding thing which had suddenly slammed down behind her. She had fiercely attacked the obstruction with teeth and claws, to no avail.

Now she was curled up against the cold partition, tail and paws neatly gathered in, her fur running with spasmodic shivers. How long had she been there, waiting? Being a cat, her time sense was limited, and her patience infinite. At first she had called, sending distress signals to she who was her companion. No reply.... except a curious sense of another presence, a calm and comforting presence which had touched her small soul with wondrous gentleness and respect; so unlike the Humans, always prone to invade her privacy with a sad lack of courtesy! She had shyly responded and conveyed her distress to the seeking, serene mind, and had felt somehow that this strange and kind being would come and help.

So Cherie-Belle was waiting, patient yet expectant, when sudden noises made her prick her ears. People were moving and talking loudly nearby.... then a grating sound made her jump back, and a streak of light pierced the darkness, and rough voices roared painfully. She peered through the crack, whiskers a-quiver, petrified with fear, for there was danger out there. She felt herself cornered, and was therefore determined to fight any attack, so when a huge, threatening hand loomed suddenly into her line of vision the brave cat spat in anger, and with unsheathed claws, struck with lightning speed... and apparent success, since the hand quickly withdrew with a yelp. So far, so good. Cherie-Belle retreated as far back as she dared and waited, growling under her breath.

Meanwhile Spock, having been duly apprised of the success of the search by an elated Chief Engineer, was swiftly striding along Corridor B, deck eight.

At the end of that corridor, however, a heated discussion was in full swing. Joyce Garrick, petrified with dismay, had watched as one of the technicians climbed the steps, thrust his arm into the aperture, and groped about. A second later he had pulled back with a yell of pain and clambered down to the deck.

"Blast it! Look what the blighter's done!" he cursed, displaying a bleeding hand to his shipmates.

Mr Scott took a look at it and tutted. "That's a nasty scratch you have there, lad. Better show that to the Doctor right away; might be poisonous, you never know. Did you see what kind of creature it is?"

"No, sir, but it'll be tricky to get it. It seems to be stuck behind a loose panel which has got jammed somehow."

"Och.... that's all we need now," Scott complained.

"Guess we'll have to stun the thing, Lieutenant," volunteered a zealous guard, unfastening his phaser.

"Looks like it," Caromandel nodded agreement. "What do you think, Mr Scott?"

"Aye, it seems to be the only way," Scotty agreed reluctantly. "Go ahead - but mind my equipment, for pity's sake, lad; we've enough repairs on our hands as it is!"

The guard, half way up the steps, was aiming his phaser carefully, when suddenly: "NO! No, please.... don't!"

Startled, they spun round as Cadet Garrick, pale and wide-eyed, went on breathlessly, "Please, Mr Scott, don't let them do it.... it might kill her.... please!"

Scott stared at the girl in bemusement.

"Her? Whatever do you mean? Do you know what that thing is? Come on, speak up, lassie!"

"I.... I believe.... well, actually, I'm pretty sure that.... she's my pet."

"Your pet!" Caromandel snorted. "Good grief, girl! You have the cheek to let a dangerous animal go gallivanting about in the conduction system - and we've seen the disastrous consequences of it - are you careless, or irresponsible, or what?"

"I would never allow her to run loose on the ship, ma'am, I know better," Joyce bristled. "I'm sorry, but she escaped from my cabin about two days ago, and I've been looking for her ever since."

"Now, look here, young lady!" Mr Scott assumed his no-nonsense expression. "Let's be having some plain speaking. This pet of yours, now.... what is it?"

"A cat, Mr Scott."

"A cat? A cat could never disorganise the support systems like that! You're having me on, lass!"

"Must be a super-cat!" someone quipped.

"Ridiculous!" the Security Chief declared scornfully. "The girl's trying to pull our legs, that's all!"

Joyce was outraged. "I am not!" she cried hotly. "You just let me get to her and you'll see if it's not a cat!"

"Now, now, lass! Take it easy!" The last thing that Mr Scott wanted right now was a wrangle between two excited females. "Suppose you get up there and have a look.... see if it really is your cat, then we'll know for sure, won't we?"

"Yes, sir.... of course." She climbed the few steps nimbly and called softly into the dark opening.

At once a desperate miaow responded from inside, echoing throughout the ducts like a roar and triggering loud guffaws among the onlookers. Joyce climbed down, face alight with triumph.

"It is her.... it's my cat, Mr Scott, I know. May I have her back?"

Lieutenant Caromandel, however, was not to be outdone. She bristled with righteous indignation. "Whoever heard of a cat on a Starship? Don't you know Starfleet regulations, Cadet? You just wait and see what the Captain will have to say about this! He must be informed immediately."

"Of what must I be informed?" a deep voice coolly asked from behind them.

At once a deafening silence fell on the group. Joyce, petrified with apprehension, watched the cloaked figure, hitherto unnoticed, of the Vulcan as he approached silently like a dark nemesis and halted in front of her. She stood to stiff attention, eyes focussed on the silver fastener of his cloak, and felt herself blushing helplessly under his inquisitive gaze.

Thankfully the awkward pause was broken by Mr Scott, who defused the situation by saying genially, "Ah, Captain, we've found the culprit, and we know what that life-form of yours is, after all."

"Indeed, Mr Scott?" Spock looked mildly intrigued.

"Aye, sir; and, believe it or not, it's all been caused by the pet cat of this lassie here. It somehow gave her the slip, and got lost in the ducts," Scott revealed with a wink, knowing perfectly well that Spock's keen hearing must have caught most of the discussion.

"So, we have another stowaway aboard the Enterprise," the Captain mused. "What have you to say for yourself, Cadet Garrick?"

"I.... I am awfully sorry, sir," she stammered.

"I should not need to remind you that it is against Federation laws to transport aboard a Starship any animal that may endanger the lives of the crew." The voice was stern, the face coldly austere - as Joyce ascertained with a furtive glance upwards - but in the dark eyes fixed upon her lurked something.... something like a glimmer of secret humour.

Screwing up her courage she swallowed and replied, "I'm sorry if I did wrong, Captain, but I had heard.... I mean, I thought that the crew were allowed to keep pets, and.... You see, I've never been parted from my cat, and she's so well-behaved that I never imagined that she could be a danger to the ship. I apologise, sir."

An enigmatic eyebrow arched slightly.

"It would seem, Cadet, that you have unfortunately yielded to the very Human propensity to act upon beliefs and hearsay rather than investigate the definite facts. I suggest that this regrettable.... incident be a lesson to you."

"Begging the Captain's pardon!" Lieutenant Garomandel protested. "This is a blatant case of misconduct and infringement of regulations which demands disciplinary action. I respectfully point it out, sir."

A cold stare froze her to the spot. "Allow me to be the sole judge in this matter, Lieutenant. I shall make my decision at the proper time. What matters at this point is the rescue of the animal and the repair of the damage that it has caused. Mr Scott, I understand that the cat is in a precarious situation, and is unable to leave the duct without assistance?"

"Quite right, Captain," Mr Scott assented, laughing up his sleeve. "You see, it's right there, but it's caught behind a panel which we'll have to move first, and the trouble is that the wee beastie's frightened now; and she's got sharp claws!"

"I can do it, sir," Cadet Garrick volunteered. "She won't be scared with me."

The Engineer chuckled.

"It won't do, lassie. You're too short; you'll never reach the unit, let alone take it out. No, we'll need some pliers.... Here, Andersen, go and fetch me...."

"Unnecessary, Mr Scott. There is another way." And, in one fluid movement, the Vulcan shook off his cloak, let it drop to the deck, and set a foot on the first rung of the ladder.

"But, Captain, you can't do that!" Scott objected. "Not with your arm in a sling. You'll hurt yourself."

"This sling, Mr Scott? It is at best a useless prop to satisfy the professional conscience of the good Doctor." Thus saying, Spock grasped the ladder and quickly climbed the few steps.

The muted laughter petered out in hushed expectation as the Vulcan paused and peered into the darkness. He reached out, some faint scratching and spluttering were heard, then a brief snap followed by the screeching sound of metal being torn.

The next thing that they saw was Spock handing down a heavy piece of equipment rent like a flimsy sheet of paper.

"Here, Mr Scott. The duct is now clear. I recommend total silence lest we panic the animal further."

Standing transfixed, they held their breath, and after a moment they heard a faint miaow, something moving stealthily; then at last, the bewhiskered face of a tabby cat peered cautiously through the hatch, coming face to face with the Captain. Amber eyes locked with obsidian, exchanging a solemn gaze, then very gently, Spock laid his fingertips on Cherie's brow. She blinked and crouched down, then closed her eyes.

"Mr Scott, sir, what's happening?" came a hoarse whisper.

"Sssssh, lad. The Captain's talking to the cat," hissed the Engineer.

The old hands, who knew their Vulcan, smiled and exchanged knowing glances, but the newcomers gaped in disbelief. Whatever was the Captain up to now?

After a long pause Spock began to stroke the animal, and she responded ecstatically, arching her back, nuzzling the so-gentle sensitive fingers against her head, and whirring a purr so loud that it echoed down the ducts.

Joyce could hardly believe it. Her pet, usually so shy, so stand-offish with strangers, was brazenly flirting with the Captain with the most shameless and irresistible coquetry. What was more, the Captain seemed to like it! From where she stood Joyce could see his profile, and his lips were definitely curved into a smile! Trust Cherie-Belle to steal everyone's heart, even that of a Vulcan!

Then Spock presented his hand, palm upwards, to the cat, and at once she understood. She stepped gingerly onto the proffered hand, then crawled and tottered along his arm, clutching at the thick cloth of the uniform, until she felt secure on wide shoulders and, purring contentedly, settled on the back of his neck.

When Spock set foot back on the deck he found himself confronting a grinning crew and a sarcastic Chief Medical Officer.

Doctor McCoy, armed with his emergency medi-kit, had arrived hotfoot onto the scene, ready for the worst. After hearing a most disturbing report from the wounded crewman he had expected no less than a dangerous, roaring creature, kept at bay by a valiant crew. Instead of which he had found the most delightful kitten purring contentedly on the Captain's shoulders - a sight which the good Doctor wouldn't have missed for anything!

"Well, well.... how about that!" he drawled. "Is that what's caused all the havoc in your machinery, Scotty? And our brave Captain has tamed the wild beast, of course!"

"Hardly that, Doctor," Spock murmured, cautiously disengaging sharp claws from his tunic and gently removing Cherie-Belle from his shoulders to hold her in his arms.

"Now you may be joking, Doctor," chuckled Mr Scott, visibly enjoying himself, "but that's exactly what he did! He had hardly talked to the wee beastie than she came along like a lamb. You can think yourself lucky, young lassie," he added to Joyce, "that we have a Captain who's expert at handling all kinds of species of animal, and that your wee cat doesn't seem any the worse for wear." He gave Cherie-Belle a small pat on the head.

"No, indeed, Mr Scott. She requires nourishment and rest, otherwise she seems undamaged. However...." Spock shot a sidelong glance at McCoy. "Since you have brought your kit, Doctor, and since you are such an expert at performing physicals, perhaps you should check the animal's condition?"

"Come on, Spock! I'm a doctor, not a...."

"A veterinarian? Naturally, I am aware of that fact, Doctor," Spock cut in glibly, "but judging by your vast experience with alien life-forms such as tribbles, hortas, etcetera, I assume that you

would be able...."

"Spock!" McCoy exploded. "You tricky.... Vulcan!" But as he glared at the Captain's face, a study of bland innocence, the Doctor perceived something like an impish glint in the depths of his eyes, which made him realise that, in retaliation for his previous leg-pulling, Spock was giving him a taste of his own blend of humour. Being a good sport McCoy decided to play along, and replied good-humouredly.

"All right, all right, Captain, point taken; but I'm damned if I know what the normal readings are for cats!"

Amidst the laughter and jests of the crew McCoy made a show of calibrating his tricorder and waved his mini-scanner over the animal secure in the Vulcan's arms.

"Oh no you don't! You naughty puss!" he exclaimed suddenly, as he whisked his scanner out of the cat's reach; fascinated by the bright, whirring object above her, Cherie-Belle had assumed that it was a new toy, and was trying to catch it with her paw.

"You are in a playful mood, aren't you, my pretty?" he remarked, tickling the cat under her chin. It hadn't taken Cherie long to bewitch the Doctor as well.

"Well," McCoy went on at his most professional, "so far as I can see, there's nothing wrong with this cat except that she's starving, and needs a meal immediately. Is this your pet, young lady? Well, I prescribe three meals a day, good nutritious food.... but I expect you know what to give her, don't you?"

"Yes, Doctor. Thank you," Joyce replied.

"Okay then. Take your cat and away you go.... unless the Captain?..."

Both looked questioningly at the Vulcan, who favoured them with an enigmatic glance and said quietly, "Your prescription is duly noted, Doctor; however, an important question remains - the illegal presence of this animal aboard the ship." He tilted an eyebrow in the direction of Mr Scott. "Since you are the senior person concerned, Chief Engineer, what do we generally do with stowaways?"

Scott, taking his cue from his Captain, assumed his most sagacious look and shook his head. "Well, sir, if we've to abide strictly to regulations...."

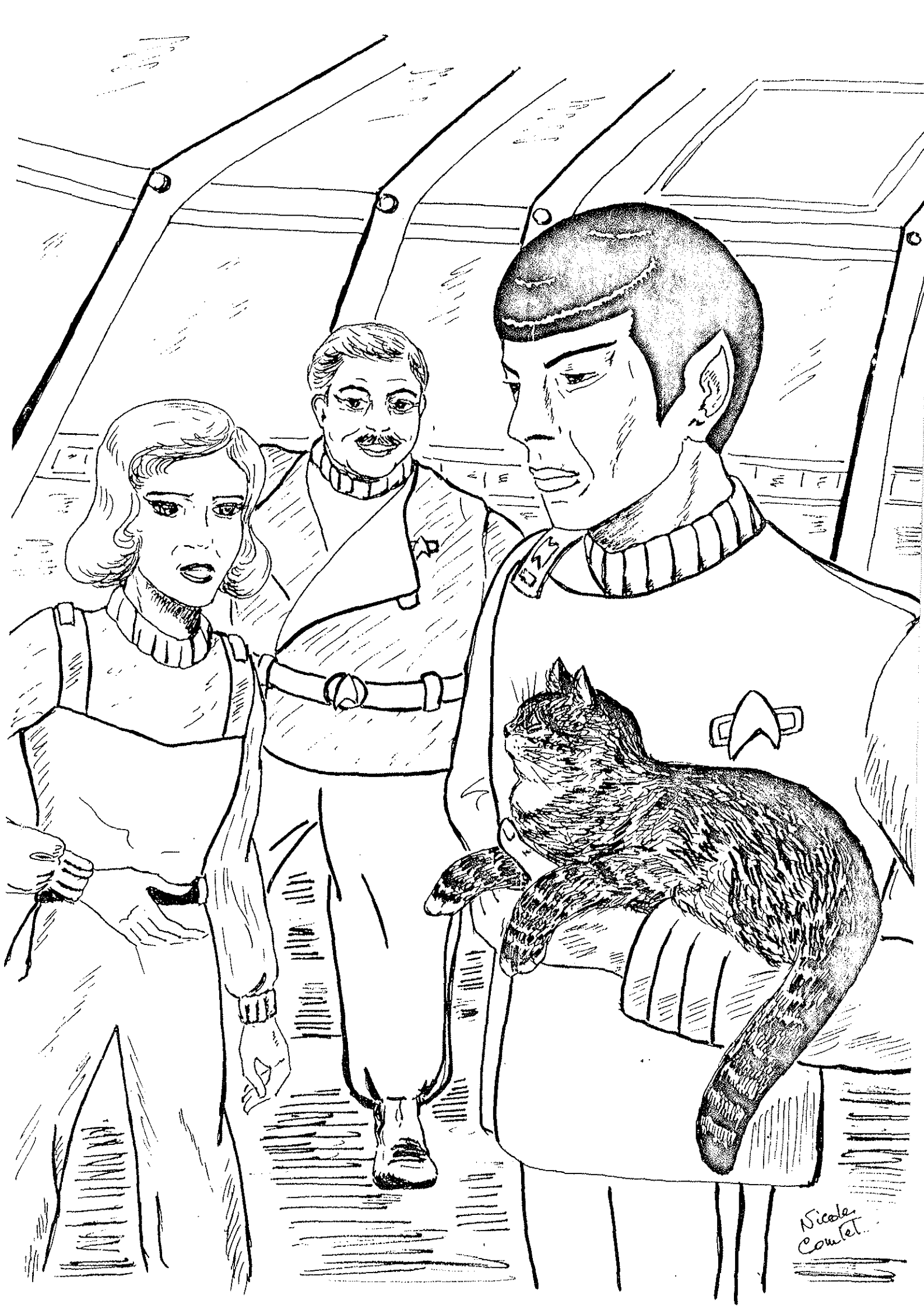
Cadet Garrick, waiting breathlessly for the verdict, glanced from the Engineer to her pet, who, blissfully unaware of her impending fate, was nestled coaxingly against the Captain's chest.

"Regulations.... indeed...." mused the latter. "Earlier, Mr Scott, I believe that you suggested the forcible ejection of the culprit via an airlock?"

At the words Joyce's heart missed a beat, and McCoy, who by now was wondering what the two were getting up to, expostulated,

"Look here, Spock! You can't do that!"

"Doctor, one moment, please! Mr Scott?"



"Aye, sir, so I did, but...." with a reluctant grin Scott patted the furry head, thus triggering at once another loud purr "but it seems a shame to do that to this bonny creature, Captain. Still, on the other hand, short of clapping her in the brig for the rest of the voyage, I don't quite see...." With a meaningful glance Mr Scott left the decision to his commanding officer, who naturally responded at once, in Spockian mode.

"Do you not, Mr Scott? There is, however, a possible alternative, acceptable to all parties, which may have escaped your attention."

"Sir?" Scotty had obviously lost the thread.

"Indeed. Starfleet regulations clearly state that, short of immediate expulsion, a stowaway will work his or her passage on the ship illegally boarded."

A stunned silence ensued, followed by a burst of laughter and the Doctor's derisive comment, "Work! You're joking! How can you make this kitten work, Spock? The old days of wooden ships and clippers are gone, and there are no mice on Starships!"

"Agreed, Doctor," the Vulcan replied mildly. "But allow me to point out that a cat may be useful in many other ways. Furthermore, a free-spirited being such as this should not be kept in confinement; she should have the free run of the ship, therefore...."

"Begging your pardon, Captain," an anxious Scott objected. "You don't mean to set the beastie loose on the ship? What if she wanders into restricted areas? And what if she gets lost again?"

"Unlikely, Mr Scott, since she will at all times carry a miniaturised transmitter. I am relying on your skilled team of engineers to affix it to a suitably sized strap or collar."

In quick succession the Engineer's scowl gave way to a grin, then to a puzzled look as the Captain, his fingers toying gently with thick fur, continued imperturbably, "As for eventual risks pertaining to restricted areas of the ship, allow me to set your mind at rest. The animal understands perfectly now that there are places where she must not go, and things that she must not do."

"Sir?" Mr Scott, lost for words, looked bemusedly from cat to Vulcan with the uncanny feeling that he could see, in dark eyes and golden, something like a mutual understanding, even an amused complicity. He swallowed, cleared his throat, and rather dazedly acknowledged, "Uh.... if you say so, Captain, it's fine by me. Of course, with a transmitter it'll be easy enough to trace the wee beastie anywhere. I'll get to work on it right away."

"Seems to me, Scotty, that you're taking a devil of a chance!" McCoy remarked caustically. "Is it really safe to give such a destructive cat the run of the ship? After what happened it hardly seems the logical thing to do, eh, Spock?"

The Captain favoured the Doctor with his best long-suffering gaze, while Cherie-Belle, cosily nestled in his arms, purred on smugly, but the Chief Engineer replied with a diffident laugh.

"I know, Doctor, it seems a bit daft, but after all, why not give it a try? It's only fair to give the wee cat a chance, don't

you think?"

Murmurs of assent and chuckles ran round the group.

"A very sensible decision, Mr Scott. The problem of this stowaway is now satisfactorily settled. Cadet Garrick!" Spock fixed his penetrating gaze on the girl standing to attention in front of him. "Here is your cat. Take care of her, and keep in mind Doctor McCoy's recommendations." He gently placed the reluctant Cherie-Belle in the arms of Joyce, who clasped her pet to her with obvious relief.

"Aye, sir. Thank you, sir," she said with a tremulous smile.

"However," Spock went on solemnly, "there is still your own case to consider. You have twenty minutes to attend to the needs of your cat, then you will report to my office. That will be all. Dismissed."

Quailing inwardly at the prospect of the Captain's dressing-down, Joyce turned about and made her escape on shaky legs, while the Doctor, shaking his head, watched her go.

"Well, there goes the cause of all our troubles. Amazing! Such a little thing.... and such disastrous consequences.... All the same, Spock, I hope you won't be too hard on the girl," he said, then turned and grinned at the sight of the Vulcan conscientiously slipping his right arm back into the sling with the attentive assistance of the Security Chief, who afterwards carefully laid on his shoulders the heavy cloak that she had picked up from the deck, and had clutched since.

Ignoring McCoy's ironic grin Spock coolly said, "Thank you, Lieutenant, that will be all for now. You may dismiss your detail." Then, looking at the Doctor with perfect composure, he finally replied, "I shall do what must be done, Doctor, no more, no less. If discipline is to be maintained aboard...."

The intercom whistled stridently, and Mr Scott took it at the wall-unit nearby.

"Yes.... yes, lass, he's here. For you, Captain; it's Uhura."

The Vulcan took over. "Spock here."

"Captain," Uhura's voice filtered down. "I have just received a message from the scoutship Daredevil, en route from Starbase six. They have transmitted the co-ordinates for the rendezvous; ETA thirteen hours."

"Acknowledged. I trust that Helm and Navigation have revised course and speed accordingly?"

"Already done, Mr Spock," she said, with a short laugh.

"I expected no less, Commander; thank you. If I am needed, I shall be in my quarters."

"Understood, sir. Ah, Captain...?"

"Yes, Uhura?"

"May I ask.... We were all wondering about the intruder...."

Has he been caught, sir?"

"You may ask, Commander. You may also inform the Bridge personnel that the intruder has been apprehended, and that ship's status will shortly return to normal."

"Oh, that's great! But, excuse me, sir.... what.... who was it?" she asked, bursting with curiosity.

"The intruder? It is a carnivorous mammal, Commander. Species, feline, gender, female."

"Wha.... what!" Uhura sounded horrified as her African subconscious took possession of her imagination. "You mean.... a panther, or.... or a leopard, Captain?"

"Not at all, Uhura." The Vulcan's voice was like a soothing balm on her nerves. "It is a domestic cat; of European origin, I believe."

"A cat?" she breathed. "Just a little cat?"

"Indeed," Spock replied patiently. "Is there anything further, Commander?"

"Uh.... no, sir.... just curious...." Uhura said in a daze.

"Understandable, Commander. Spock out." Then, turning to the hilarious group in the corridor, the Captain asked innocently, "Is anything the matter, gentlemen?"

"Spock, you old fraud!" McCoy spluttered. "I never thought I'd see the day! Do you think she realised that you were pulling her leg?"

"I am sure that she did," the Vulcan replied deadpan. "Ms Uhura is a clever and perceptive individual, Doctor. Now, if you will excuse me, I have work to do...." and he strode away, leaving the others helpless with laughter.

Some time later a rather confused trainee left the Captain's office and made her way to her quarters, so absorbed in her thoughts that she hardly noticed the few shipmates who happened to pass by. When at last she reached her cabin she stopped short on the threshold and gasped in surprise; her room was crowded with people standing, sitting about or lying prone on the carpet. Vatanen, Alison, Kovack, Ferrier.... all the gang was there, even O'Brien and Kettenring, and - oh, Lord! - Commander Uhura herself, informally sitting cross-legged on the floor. They were all having fun playing with Cherie-Belle! A well-fed and glossy Cherie, sporting a bright red collar just delivered by a jocose crewman from Engineering, with the compliments of Mr Scott. What's more her naughty cat, tickled by her admiring audience, and by the ball they were tossing at her, was doing her best to make an exhibition of herself.

In the midst of all this excitement someone spotted the girl standing transfixed at the door, and with a cry of, "There she is!", Joyce suddenly found herself hugged and plied with questions.

"What was it like, Joyce? You poor girl! Tell us, what did he say?"

She walked in, and feeling suddenly weak, sank gratefully into the nearest chair. As in a dream, she heard Uhura say briskly,

"Wait a moment, give her time, will you? And someone had better fetch her a drink."

As she sipped the water and felt the tension gradually ease, Joyce heard Alison ask with concern, "Joyce, are you all right?"

She heaved a sigh and looked up at her friend. "I.... I believe so.... Sorry, but.... how come you're here, Alison? What are you doing here?"

"The Doctor has released us from Sickbay, and we're to resume our duties tomorrow morning."

"To tell the truth," Michel Kovack put in with a wink, "the Doctor actually said that since we were doing fine, and turning his Sickbay into a meeting-room, he might as well get rid of us tonight."

Commander Uhura chuckled softly, and asked her trainee, "Feeling better, Joyce? You're beginning to look more like yourself. Tell me.... was it very bad.... in the Captain's office?"

"What do you mean? How do you know?" the girl asked innocently.

They all laughed again.

"Come on, Joyce, it's all over the ship! What did you expect? You and your super-cat have become the topic of the day!"

"Oh, no!"

"Oh, yes!" Uhura explained. "I've been treated to four different versions, no less, of the tale of the stray cat, and I don't count the Captain's!" She smiled in retrospect. "When I heard that one of my trainees was involved and had been summoned to his quarters, naturally I had to come and ascertain that she'd got out unscathed and in one piece!" She winked good-humouredly.

Joyce gave a rather self-conscious smile.

"Well, I admit that when I walked into his...." A ball of fur jumping onto her lap interrupted the tale. "Oh, there you are, my darling!" she breathed, cradling and kissing her pet. "And what a pretty collar!"

"Not only pretty, but also very effective," Alison revealed. "Imagine! It's fitted with a transmitter AND a micro-device which triggers the doors. Look! Let me show you." Climbing to her feet she took the cat over to the door. As soon as Cherie-Belle got within range a faint tinkle sounded and the door slid open. The demonstration was met with applause and laughter.

"That is clever! Where did you get it?" asked Kettenring, much impressed.

"Mr Scott made it specially for Cherie, on the Captain's instructions," Alison proudly explained.

Uhura nodded. "Scotty is a wizard. He can make anything you like. I can't tell you how many times he and Spock have saved the

day with their brain-waves. But, speaking of Spock... what happened?"

"Don't tell us that he got mad at you, because I won't believe it!" Alison declared hotly.

They all laughed again.

"Of course not," Uhura observed quietly. "It's certainly not his way, although he can be pretty biting sometimes; but, tell me, will this prank of yours have any effect on your Academy ratings?"

Joyce shook her head, with a rueful smile. "No, I don't think so," she said. "But you've got it all wrong... he didn't shout at me; on the contrary, when I went in first he just looked at me with that air he has sometimes, so calm and austere, and those eyes... they make you feel he can see right into you, you know?"

"Don't we, though! That's when I wish I could sink through the floor," one of the boys said feelingly, echoed by murmurs of sympathy.

"And then?" they prompted, all agog.

"He made me sit down and gave me a lecture."

"Of course he did! With Cherie's exploits, what else would you expect?"

"No, you dolt! Not that kind of lecture! I meant a lecture, a talk."

"Oh!?" Blank looks were traded around the room. "A lecture? What about?"

Cadet Garrick took a breath.

"Lots of things. Specifically, about our duties and responsibilities as sentient beings towards lower life-forms, about the rights of those life-forms to our respect and care. And especially about the illogical and disgraceful way so many Humans have in the past considered themselves superior to other species, and treated them with cruelty and contempt, to the point of extinction. He spoke, for instance, of the animals we Humans have used, not only for food or comfort, but also for sport, fun or profit, in unspeakably bloody games which left them no chance of survival. He had a lot to say about it."

The trainees stirred uneasily at this recital, and young Ramirez muttered, "Sounds like a sermon to me!", while Ensign O'Brien pointed out, "But that's all over now! Everybody knows that bullfights, cockfights, hunting and all that have been banned for ages. And anyway, what's that got to do with you and your cat?"

"A lot," Joyce declared emphatically. "According to the Captain, we have a deplorable tendency to regard our pets as toys to be handled, pampered, confined or discarded at will, regardless of their feelings and needs. In short, he said that when we commit ourselves to any creature we must assume full responsibility towards them... and he said that my Cherie-Belle here cares for me as I care for her, but she wants more freedom and privacy, and she hates to be locked in while I'm away."

Listening to her trainee, Uhura was enjoying herself hugely. She could just imagine the Vulcan, at his desk, long hands poised in front of him, gravely discoursing to the wide-eyed girl listening with awe-struck attention.

As for Joyce's friends, they laughed in disbelief.

"You're kidding! How does he know, anyway?"

"Cherie-Belle told him!"

"What! Of all the crazy yarns...."

"It's true, I tell you. He had a telepathic contact with her, down on deck eight. I saw it, so did Mr Scott, the Doctor and many more."

Commander Uhura intervened with a knowing smile. "Joyce is right. Don't forget that the Captain is a Vulcan, and that he has the power to touch minds with other beings when necessary. Not only with you and me, as you experienced in the shuttle, didn't you?" - looking at the three former hostages, who nodded eagerly - "but also with animals, vegetables, rocks, even with invisible entities."

She smiled at the overawed faces round her, and continued. "What Joyce was just telling you is actually a sample of Vulcan philosophy: the total respect for all beings in their infinite diversity, and the moral necessity to preserve the integrity of life - what they call, I think, the Reverence for Life. In the case of Cherie-Belle, Spock probably judged that she can be trusted with the run of the ship, with certain precautions, naturally. He must know that she'll behave herself." She laughed.

"Well," O'Brien said wonderingly, "I never realised that Vulcans could be so sensitive and considerate. I am glad to know that."

"It's because you don't know Spock!" bright-eyed Alison declared. "If you were in one of his classes it wouldn't surprise you. All his students can tell you that for all his cold ways he has a great deal of compassion and understanding, can't you?"

Michel, Vera and the others agreed loudly.

"You are very perceptive, my dear," smiled Uhura. "But let me tell you something which explains his reaction to this lovely kitty. You see, when Spock was a little boy, on his home planet, he had a pet...." and the Commander unfolded to the spellbound youngsters the tale of the Vulcan boy and his sehlat I'Chaya.

"So," she concluded, "I hope this story will do away with any preconceptions some may have had of cold, emotionless, heartless Vulcans."

The response was all that Uhura had hoped for, but what pleased her most was Cadet Lawrence's remark.

"That's exactly what I keep telling my father, but he can be so prejudiced sometimes!"

Uhura pricked up her ears. "Your father? How interesting! He wouldn't be, by any chance, a rather short man, fair like you, and a friend of Admiral Kraft?" she asked casually.

"Yes, ma'am, that's him! Do you know him?" the boy asked eagerly.

"No, not personally, but I happened to meet him not long ago. Anyhow, young man, keep up the good work, and tell your father that Captain Spock is not the cold-blooded alien he imagines. As Alison told you, when you get to know him better, you realise what a special person Spock really is."

And her smile, the soft gleam in her eyes, told them, more than any words, of the precious memories she treasured.

The spell was broken by a grudging remark from Ramirez.

"Well, all I can say, Joyce, is that you're real lucky to have a cat which has obviously bewitched the Captain. I mean.... your only punishment was a lecture on animal rights. You certainly managed to get away with it!"

"I did not!" the outraged girl protested. "And Cherie-Belle has nothing to do with it! And don't start thinking that Captain Spock didn't impose any sanctions, because he did!"

"He did?" They sat up in breathless expectation.

"He did, definitely. He said that to be effective a punishment must fit the crime, and confinement to quarters would only be a waste of my time, which should be better employed in intensive training. But..." She drew a deep breath. "He also said that my illicit actions, particularly the smuggling of my pet, called for disciplinary retribution, and since they proceeded from my obvious ignorance of ship's regulations the Captain has ordered me to read - three times - Starfleet's Book of Regulations and the Discipline Manual, and," Joyce said in a hollow voice, "he specified the revised and unabridged edition, including the addenda and appendices."

In the stunned silence which ensued, the sweet voice of Vera Vatanen piped up, "Oh Joyce, you poor girl! How awful!"

This comment at once triggered a riot of laughter and exclamations, and Uhura, who had listened to her trainee's recital with secret amusement, said in a rallying tone, "Cheer up, my dear. It's not so dramatic, you know. After all, Captain Spock could have fixed on a much harder penalty, as he had every reason to do considering the damage caused by your pet. Now, far be it from me to hazard an opinion on the Captain's decision, but I believe that it's pure Vulcan logic, with a soupcon of Spockian humour for good measure; don't you agree?"

As she was endowed with a fair sense of humour Joyce could not but agree and admit that the reading of Starfleet Regulations in her free time was not so bad after all, and she good-humouredly let her friends joke and make fun of her over the whole affair.

About an hour later, in the quiet of the night, Joyce switched off her computer terminal and stretched wearily. Starfleet literature wasn't exactly fun reading, especially at this late hour.

As she got ready for bed she noticed that the light was still on in the room next door. Peeping in, she found her friend sitting

on the carpet, apparently in communion with her cat, who was curled up on the quilt, paws and tail neatly tucked in.

"What on earth are you doing? Confabulating with Cherie-Belle?"

"I wish I could," Alison murmured dreamily. "I wish she could talk, and tell us what happened when Spock touched her mind. I wonder what he told her."

"I wish I knew, too," Joyce agreed, looking at her pet who, like a diminutive sphinx, was gazing enigmatically at the two girls. "Anyhow, whatever Spock told her, I've never seen Cherie so attracted to anyone as she is to Spock. I don't know if it's due to some magnetism he has as a Vulcan, or to his attraction, but it's certainly effective!"

"Must be attraction, Joyce. I wouldn't mind being swept off my feet by the Captain!" Alison said wistfully.

"I bet you wouldn't!" Their eyes met, and all at once the girls burst into an irresistible fit of giggling.

CHAPTER X

The Bridge was humming with efficient activity and a certain expectation when the turbolift doors opened, revealing the three senior officers deep in discussion.

As they stepped onto the deck, Mr Scott was heard to declare, "Still looks to me as nutty as a Dundee cake, Captain. I reckon it'll take some doing for your specialists to rid him of his obsessions."

"Our Healers have proved their skill in worse cases than that of Xantar, Mr Scott. I have every confidence in the successful outcome of the therapy, though it may take some time," Spock replied, as he moved to the lower deck.

"Well," commented the Doctor, leaning on the railing, "now Xantar's case will be Vulcan's responsibility, and that's a good thing. If your Healers succeed where classic therapy has failed, so much the better, but I wish them joy!"

The Vulcan refrained from comment, assumed his unreadable mask, and sat down in the centre chair just vacated by the Science Officer.

"Status, Mr Schwarzenberg?"

"Sensor scans have detected the presence of the scoutship at a distance of twenty-five thousand kilometres and closing, sir. Rendezvous in two hours at present speed. We've already been in touch with them."

"Thank you, Lieutenant. Mr Sulu, prepare to reduce speed to warp factor one in fifteen minutes' time."

"Aye, sir; warp one."

As the Enterprise gradually slackened pace Uhura, hand on her earpiece, was listening intently on ship-to-ship frequencies.

Presently, she turned from her board.

"I have another call from the Daredevil, sir," she announced. "Shall I open a channel?"

"By all means, Commander."

"'Daredevil'!" snorted McCoy. "What a name for a spaceship!"

"On the contrary, Doctor, it is quite appropriate," Spock remarked dryly.

"Oh, you mean, for a scoutship? Well, you may be right if what I've heard is true - that they recruit all the crackpots in the Fleet for these scout squadrons."

Meanwhile, hailing frequencies were opened.

"Enterprise calling Daredevil.... This is Enterprise.... Daredevil, do you read?" Uhura called.

In a crackle of static, the answer came in. "This is Daredevil.... We read you, Enterprise. Please stand by."

After a brief pause another voice took over, one which, to the Communications Officer, sounded vaguely familiar.

"Enterprise.... Is that Uhura? The unique, the inimitable Uhura?"

Taken aback, she replied somewhat sharply. "It is.... please identify yourself."

The voice chuckled. "I'd have known your sweet voice anywhere. It's a joy to hear you in this godforsaken quadrant of space! Don't you remember me, Uhura?"

By this time the Bridge was astir with mirth and curiosity, and the Captain, one quizzical eyebrow raised towards his hairline, swivelled his chair and looked up at the nonplussed Commander.

"Don't you know your friends when you hear them, Ms Uhura? Do you not recognise the voice?" he inquired.

Confused and intrigued, she stared at Spock, then all of a sudden, she brightened and exclaimed, "Of course! That voice.... I should have known! Kevin, is that you?"

"Who else, my dear?"

"What are you doing on a scoutship?" she asked, swiftly running nimble fingers over her keyboard.

Sulu spun round, wide-eyed. "Kevin? Out there? It can't be! He was at Fleet HQ last time I saw him."

"You may see for yourself, Mr Sulu," Spock quietly remarked, nodding in the direction of the viewscreen, and as they watched the star-studded area of space shimmered away, and the Bridge of the Daredevil flickered into view, with, in the command chair, the jovial person of Kevin Thomas Riley, grinning from ear to ear.

"Kevin Riley! I'll be damned!" breathed Doctor McCoy.

"You were right, Doctor," Mr Scott stage-whispered with a wink. "They *do* recruit crackpots for scouts!"

Riley, meanwhile, was genially surveying the Enterprise Bridge, picking out his former shipmates. "Mr Spock! My regards, Captain; glad to see you again. And Sulu, old chap! Still at the helm, I see. Mr Scott and Doctor McCoy, of course! Where would the Enterprise be without you? And Uhura! And since you ask, my dear, what I'm doing here is being First Officer of the Daredevil, and I can tell you that...."

"Mr Riley.... Mr Riley," Spock said firmly, quenching the Irishman's prattle. "May I speak with your Captain?"

"Impossible, Captain," said Riley with a grin. "Captain Trendall is abed with flu, and as pleased as a bear with a sore head! So I'm temporarily in command. Sorry, sir!"

"Indeed? Most unfortunate. I had intended to invite him and his officers to beam over to the Enterprise."

"Sorry, sir, but no one's allowed to see him. Our M.O. is keeping him in isolation, and believe me, she's quite a tartar when it comes to contagious diseases and quarantine regulations."

"And she's damn right!" McCoy put in approvingly. "You don't want your entire crew stricken with flu, do you? What virus is it, do you know, Riley? Rigellian, Denebian, or the....?"

"I'm afraid I don't know, Doctor. You'd better ask Gertie; she mentioned a rather rare infection...."

"Perhaps you should contact their M.O., Doctor?" Spock suggested, sotto voce. "She may be glad of your advice, and we are better equipped than a scoutship."

"That's exactly what I intend to do, Spock, and I might even pay a house call to their Captain." McCoy strode purposefully to the turbolift and departed.

"Mr Riley, as soon as we are within transporter range Doctor McCoy will be beaming over to meet your Ship's Surgeon and see whether there is anything that he can do to help. Also, I believe that your former crewmates would appreciate a visit from you."

"Why.... thank you, Captain. That would be great! Er.... would you allow me to bring some of my mates with me? They're dying to take a look at the Enterprise."

"Certainly, Mr Riley, they will be most welcome. Now, as regards the transfer of our prisoner, I recommend that you send a strong security detail. He is somewhat difficult at times."

"Noted, sir. We will send you our coordinates for beaming."

"Acknowledged, Mr Riley. Spock out." The Captain motioned to Uhura, and the starry field of space reappeared on the screen.

An impromptu party was in progress in the rec-room on deck seven. For the last hour or so the Daredevil officers had been on a V.I.P. tour of the Enterprise, conducted by Commanders Uhura and

Sulu, and had been duly impressed with the improvements made to the ship during her refit, particularly in the facilities provided for the comfort and entertainment of the crew. They were currently relaxing in the easy chairs in the lounge, in the company of Riley's former colleagues. As a vast selection of drinks and goodies was handed round, the convivial gathering was becoming perceptibly more and more lively, and the arrival of Mr Scott and some of his team had raised the decibel level a notch or two.

Naturally, the presence of the scoutship - which anyone could see through the viewports, on a parallel course - and the beaming aboard of her officers, whose reputation for daring bravado was known far and wide through the Fleet, had roused the curiosity of the crew, and many, on one pretext or another, had found their way to the rec-room to take a peek at the Daredevil's command team. As might be expected, after a vivid account of their patrolling duties, embroidered with hair-raising details for good measure, the conversation drifted to the Enterprise's eventful career and the original five-year mission. Mr Scott, of course, did not fail to remind Kevin Riley of the part that he had played in the Psi 2000 episode, when, infected by a virus from that dying world, crewmembers had gone berserk, endangering the ship. The Chief Engineer had his audience in stitches as he described Riley in Engineering, singing at the top of his voice, while Sulu was chasing everyone with a sword. It felt good to all concerned to laugh about an event which, at the time, had been dramatic enough.

After that Riley and his fellow officers had to be told all about the abortive hijacking of the ship, and the thrilling episode of the shuttle, which had led to the capture of Xantar, and consequently to their own rendezvous with the Enterprise.

In the midst of all this Doctor McCoy arrived, escorting a middle-aged, no-nonsense looking woman, who, at the sight of the jolly party, pulled a face and dryly uttered, "Oh, there you are.... downing liquor as usual. I might have known!"

This stale joke was received with the usual banter, and she was introduced as Gertie Anderson, Medical Officer of the Daredevil, then given a seat, a drink, and a warm welcome, for in spite of her brusque ways she was very popular with the scoutship crew.

The two physicians reported on Captain Trendall's condition, already improving with the medicines provided by the Enterprise laboratories when suddenly Doctor Anderson gave a start and a squeak, and all but dropped her glass of Romulan beer.

"Gracious!" she cried, looking down. "What's that? Why... it's a cat!" She stared in surprise at the gracious tabby cat rubbing against her leg and gazing up at her out of amber eyes.

"A cat!" Riley was taken aback. "Since when have you had a cat on the Enterprise?"

Naturally, Cherie-Belle was duly introduced and her adventures described with a wealth of detail.

"....and," ended Uhura, "it all turned out for the best, as she's fast becoming the pet of the entire ship; she's so cute, everyone likes her."

"Actually," Sulu added, "there are very few cat-haters on board, and she's so smart she soon found them out."

"Really, who could hate such a lovely cat?" protested Gertie Anderson, patting the glossy fur. "And what's her name? Cherie-Belle? Very pretty!"

"Actually, the crew have taken to calling her Tinkerbell because of her collar; it's been rigged by Scotty and it tinkles to open the doors!" Sulu said.

"As you can see, Doctor," McCoy remarked to his colleague, "our engineering department has nothing better to do than manufacture fancy articles for pets."

"Captain's orders, Leonard," Mr Scott smilingly pointed out.

"Was it?" Doctor Anderson was intrigued. "I was just going to ask.... Your Captain.... how did he take it?"

"In his stride!" grinned Sulu.

"Did he really? A cat on the ship? You're lucky, ours would have kicked up a rumpus!"

"Sure!" Riley chuckled. "Trendall would have raised hell just at the mere idea. No place for pets on a scoutship. But still, I'm rather surprised at Spock.... I mean...."

"Are you, Kevin? I thought you knew him better," Uhura remarked. "Do you know what he said to my trainee? He said that animals are entitled to our respect, and must be treated with tact and consideration.... or words to that effect."

"Well.... somehow I didn't imagine Spock like that. I don't know...."

"Actually," McCoy revealed, "it all comes down to the plain fact that our Vulcan is so taken with that cat, and vice versa, that one wonders who seduced which!" - Burst of laughter - "No.... I'm not kidding, you can ask anyone on board. Those two have become practically inseparable - haven't they?"

"Quite right," Sulu nodded. "For instance, you should see the Captain when he does his rounds at night, during late shift. That's a habit he has, haunting the ship like the ghost of the Cantervilles! Well, most of the time now you see him prowling the corridors with that cat trotting and capering at his heels.... quite a sight, I can tell you!"

"I can well imagine!" Gertie Anderson smiled, and gently began to stroke Cherie-Belle's head as the cat lay cosily snuggled in Uhura's lap. "She is a dear. I love cats, you know. I wish we could have one too on the Daredevil."

"I'm afraid you don't stand a chance, Doctor, if Captain Trendall feels that way," Uhura told her. "Here, on the other hand, this little lady is a V.I.P., the Captain's darling, aren't you, my pet? Hey! What's the matter? Where are you going?"

Cherie-Belle had suddenly jumped down onto the deck, and was swiftly sneaking away across the lounge, tail raised like a banner.

"What happened to her? Where's she going?"

"Ahem!" Mr Scott cleared his throat and shot a warning glance

up at the lounge entrance.

There, hands locked behind his back, stood the Captain, a study in Vulcan inscrutability, coolly surveying the assembly; but to judge by the tilt of a fastidious eyebrow Spock's ears had apparently not missed much of the Humans' loud conversation.

As the officers hastily got to their feet McCoy felt bound to do his grouching act.

"Dammit, Spock! I wish you'd quit that habit of yours of creeping up behind people's backs and taking them unawares. You always manage to give me a guilt complex."

"Do I, Doctor?" asked the Vulcan, all innocence. "I find that most gratifying." He stooped to give a light pat to the purring cat rubbing round his boots, apparently indifferent to the officers' chuckles.

"Won't you join us for a drink, Captain?" offered Mr Scott.

Spock unfolded his long frame and straightened up.

"Thank you, Mr Scott, but I must decline. I regret having to interrupt this social gathering, but the prisoner is ready for transfer and waiting with the security squad. I suggest that we proceed to the transporter room."

"Certainly, Captain," Doctor Anderson replied readily. "Alas, all good things must come to an end."

"Indeed, Doctor, when duty calls. Mr Riley," Spock went on, handing him a pack of tapes, "here are copies of our reports on the Xantar case, including the evidence given by the hostages. They are to be delivered to the Base Commander and to the head of the Vulcan medical team."

"They will be, sir, without fail, as soon as we reach the Base," assured Kevin Riley. "And thanks for the party: it's been great to see you all again after all these years."

Spock acknowledged his remarks with a curt nod and led the way out, the others trooping behind him, as the Enterprise officers wished to see their guests off from the transporter room.

After a deflated 'Libertador', closely guarded by Security, had finally sparkled from existence, and after the Daredevil officers had waved goodbye from the beaming pads and also disappeared from view, Mr Scott, who had personally supervised the transportation, expressed his opinion with a deep sigh of relief.

"Well, I don't know about you, but I'm damned glad to be rid of that devil, and I hope that's the last we'll ever see of him."

"Agreed, Mr Scott, although only time will tell," Spock replied quietly; then, turning to the intercom, he called the Bridge.

"Farrell here, Captain," came the reply.

"Mr Farrell, take us out on course one, one, mark four, warp factor three."

"Aye, sir, one, one, mark four."

It was left to Doctor McCoy to have the last word.

"And that's that!" he commented on the way out. "Now for a nice, relaxed, uneventful cruise. That's what I was promised, and that's all I'm asking for!"

